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# You, Me, and the Unknown: A Creative Exploration Into the Emotions We Feel About What We Don't Understand

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**You, Me, and the Unknown:  
A creative exploration into the emotions we feel  
about what we don't understand**

**by**

**Lena Hall**

**An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the**

**requirements for the degree of**

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**in**

**University Honors**

**and**

**Graphic Design**

**Thesis Advisor**

**Sean Schumacher**

**Portland State University**

**2024**

# You, Me, and the

A creative exploration into  
the emotions we feel about  
what we don't understand



LENA HALL

YOU, ME, AND THE UNKNOWN

# Abstract

I've always found the concept of fear and anxiety to be incredibly fascinating. As someone who grew up with extreme anxiety, I always wanted to rationalize it and figure out exactly why I felt that way. Anxiety is the inherent fear of the unknown and I wanted to know more about why we fear what we don't understand, or in other cases, why we love it. I conducted a research project on our perceptions of the unknown that resulted in an experimental page layout print publication where I shared the participant's views on the unknown through a visual storytelling medium.

# Introduction

I learned growing up that a child's lack of vocabulary is their downfall. I still remember being five years old when I first experienced—what I now know as a panic attack—but I never had the words to explain what I was feeling. Later in my life, I was diagnosed with a severe anxiety disorder, but before this, I was afraid of everything. Anything I didn't have the answer to was an unknown variable that caused me an insurmountable fear. This was debilitating for a long time, but when I was properly diagnosed and received the help I needed, I began to find interest in the fear that I once had. This interest in anxiety turned into a question. Anxiety is a fear of the unknown, but what other emotions do we have around what we don't understand, and why is it human nature to explore these unknowns?

For my thesis, I explored how we feel about the unknown through personal stories. After collecting various stories from survey respondents, I understand what the unknown looks like to others and situations that they've been in that they considered unknown or anxiety-inducing because they couldn't predict the outcome. Our fear of the unknown is a human response that everyone experiences because we are curious creatures that want answers, but I want to know how we feel about things we don't have answers to. What is the emotional response

that we have to unknown situations? For this project, I aim to make an experimental publication. I've received many stories from others about their experiences regarding the unknown, and I want to communicate these somehow, so I decided to communicate this through a print publication.

# Research

I had three separate research methods, secondary research, or academic research from various sources, primary research, which consisted of survey responses from peers and a game test, and visual research that helped to articulate both how the project would look and how the deliverables might be communicated.

## a. Understanding Our Feelings

BBC's article, "Why we're so terrified of the unknown," by David Robson is one of the articles that I researched when beginning this process. This article delves into why uncertainty makes us so unsettled as well as our physical response to anxiety revolving around the unknown. An aspect of this that I found the most interesting is an experiment that the article highlights. The experiment had participants hooked up to electrodes and a heart monitor. The participants were told that they would be shocked, but the heart monitors showed that the participant's heart rate increased before the shock as opposed to during or after because the anticipation was more anxiety-in-

ducing than the shock itself. I found this interesting because this experiment exemplified how we anticipate what might happen instead of what is happening. Another article that I found interesting was, "The Unknown in decision making: what to do about it" by Mujgan S. Ozdemir. This article explores how we make decisions around things with uncertain outcomes. This also explores our confidence and its relation to the unknown. If we feel more confident, the idea of unknowns feels less intimidating because we feel comfortable in ourselves to be okay with the outcome of the situation. I thought these articles were interesting because they explore the physical response that our bodies have to unknown situations and how different variables play into our fear and anxiety responses.

## b. Initial Polls

I sent out a survey asking fellow students and friends their feelings about the unknown and received 33 responses. To pick from a few responses, some of the best answers were the following. In response to the question, "How would you describe the unknown?", I sent out a survey asking fellow students and friends their feelings about the unknown and received 33 responses. To pick from a few responses, some of the best answers were the following. In response to the question, "How would you describe the unknown?",

"For me, the unknown is inspiring. it can be really interesting horror or science fiction or fantasy that gets to

be taken at face value. not complicated by expectations or mechanics, it just is. very strong sense of vibe, complex and engaging. it could be a vessel for genuine and known ideas/feelings as well. sort of like horror sometimes being very closely tied with queer culture and feelings.”

“The unknown to an individual human is 99.99999999% of all that is, was, could be, might be, and will be. The unknown in general is a thing, factor, condition, rule, influence, nebulous something or nothing, tangible or intangible that is not understood, sensed, perceived, observed, known, acknowledged, noted, or recognized. Some things are always unknown, some things are temporarily unknown, known, then unknown again. Some things are known by many, some by few, some by none. Unknown is a state of being. Nothing is ever fully known, including by the thing itself. You are unknown, even to yourself, as am I. In a way, everything and all is at least somewhat unknown.”

These responses stood out to me because it was validating in a way. I wasn't sure if these feelings that I had around this concept were unique and it felt isolating at times, but both of these responses shocked me because these responses were communicating what I felt.

In response to the question, “Can you share a moment when you experienced

something you considered unknown?”

“I remember learning that emotions can be felt in your body. That was not something I had known was possible due to repression.”

“Every second of my life. Every thought, sound, sight, and sense I experience is initially new and thus unknown. Some become somewhat known, others never do. A coworker just stopped by and, by chance, told me they are interested in helping with a task. I hadn't known they wanted to help with this. I now have some understanding of their skills in the task.”

I think these responses were interesting because it's not exactly what I expected. The unknown surrounds us much more than we realize.

And in response to the question, “Are there any specific unknowns that you find most interesting/unsettling? (e.g. the vastness of space, mysteries, the unexplored ocean)”

“All of the ones you mentioned for sure as well as my unknown potential. Like what skills I can develop and what practical knowledge I can gain. But yeah deep sea is very interesting its an almost completely unexplored unique ecosystem. Also, the density of stuff to look at in temperate forests esp. jungles. Even if we know everything about them the experience

of exploring them itself is an inviting unknown to me. Boreal forests not so much I prefer warm environments.”

“Myself”

These responses were more intricate and well thought out than I could have imagined and the ones I pulled were specifically singled out because they were answers that I didn't expect. I found the vulnerability and honesty very brave and understanding what others identify as the unknown is simultaneously familiar to me and shocking that these are things that cause feelings of uncertainty or curiosity.

### **c. Rorschach Test**

A second test that I did was a Rorschach test because I wanted to explore the immediate reactions that people had to unsettling and scary images, this was because I wanted to know what imagery triggered intense reactions that could be applied to both the visual identity and the content of the book. I collected a series of images that I split into two parts to show participants. The first part of the test was images that fall into the category of “liminal spaces,” which are defined as transitional spaces and are often depicted as abandoned, old, and surreal. The general response here was unsettled, but some familiarity with the images. Some responses to these images were, empty, scared, watched, serene, familiar, and lonely. For the second series of images, I compiled pictures of people that fall into the “uncanny valley,” which

is a psychological response we have to almost human things, but we can tell that they're not human enough to properly be recognized as human. The responses to these were much more negative and unsettled. Some answers were, disturbed, gross, uneasy, uncomfortable, ew, off, and dead. The reason I chose these images is because liminal spaces are places that might seem as familiar, but create an aura of uncertainty because there is so much we either can't see or doesn't make sense. I picked images that represent the “uncanny valley,” because they're supposed to be familiar as people but our brains don't recognize them and we can understand why they look wrong. The unknown of how these images work and whether they're real or not is why I had others respond to them for me.

### **d. The Stress Test**

In the last form of research, I had a friend play a game that I thought related to the subject. The game was a “backrooms simulator,” a representation of an online legend of spaces that aren't real, but completely endless. There are many interpretations of this, but endless hallways are a popular depiction. In the game, the character wanders through this maze with the threat of a possible monster. My friend, Hudson Dopp, was the test subject here and spent the time playing the game telling me the emotions that he was feeling. The main takeaway from this experiment was that Hudson was more afraid of the possibility of a monster in the backrooms before he saw it than after. Before he saw the monster, he was anxious, and

careful because the idea of a beast in the rooms was terrifying to him, but once he was caught by the monster and sent to the start, he became more confident and reckless in the gameplay. He said this was because he knew what the monster looked like and the consequences of getting caught, which were to send him back to the start. He now didn't care about the possibility of getting caught because the game wasn't linear and going back to the start wasn't a huge disadvantage. When asked about his feelings on this game in regards to the uncertainty of it, he thought that everything was more intimidating before he knew what would happen, but once there wasn't a mystery anymore, he wasn't as intimidated.

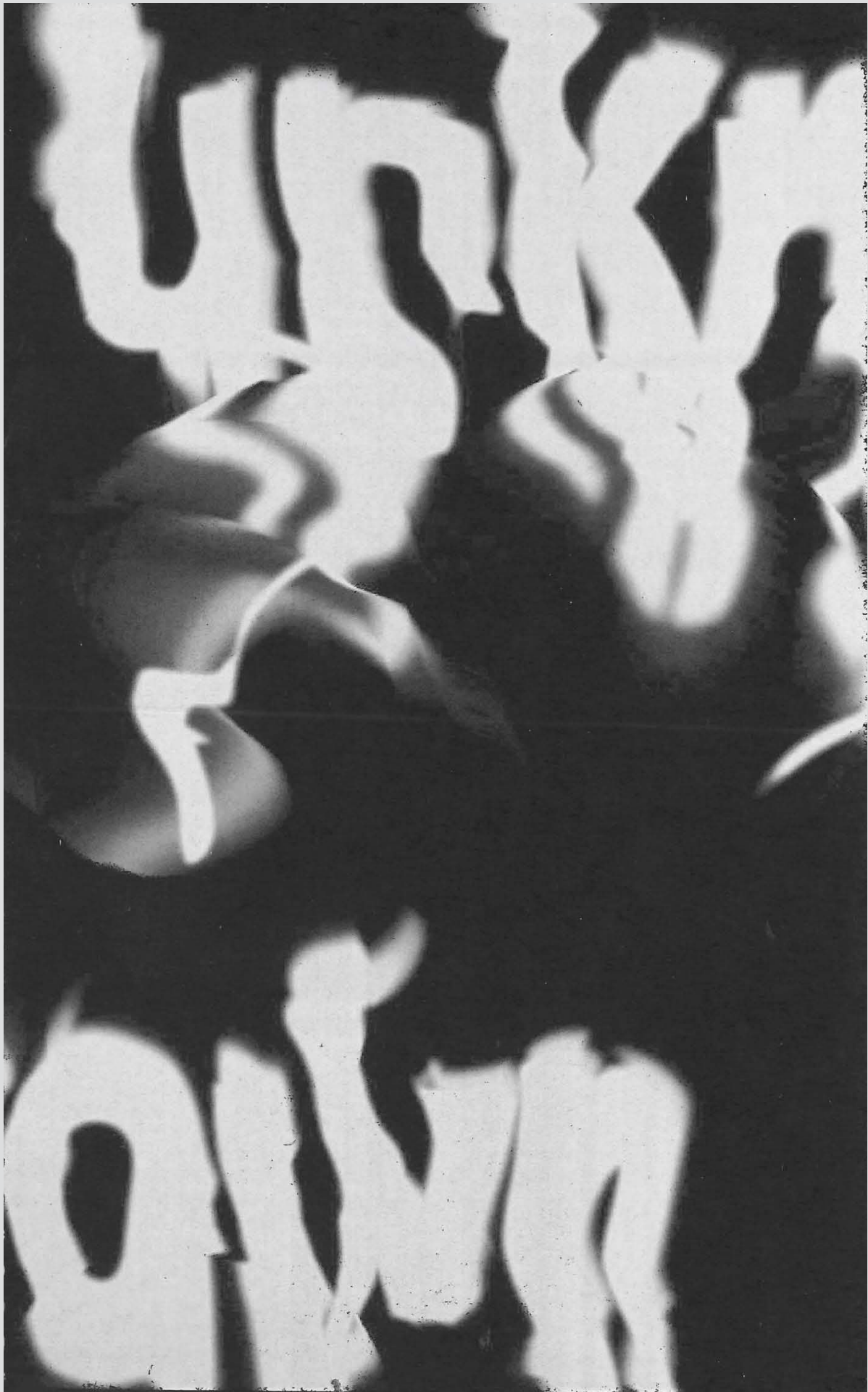
### **e. Visual Research**

For the visual research I collected, I was very inspired by pops of colors, chaotic typefaces, and rough illustrations. I think making the designs of this project seem less polished and more human will demonstrate uncomfortably around the unknown. I like the pops of red that I found in my research because they pull the eyes in, but also feel unsettling because they feel menacing and powerful, which is a common response to the color red. I think this visual identity will help communicate this emotion and will work for the building of the physical project.

# **Execution**

When moving into the creation portion of this project, I knew that I wanted to make a publication that communicated the responses I received from my interviews and surveys. Still, the visual direction was something that I wasn't sure about. The direction I ended moving in was a one-color, spiral-bound book. I specifically chose the color red because it evokes such strong emotion and adds a much-needed pop of color to the designs. The imagery used also had a red overlay to keep the colors consistent. I used a font that had a large family so I could use the same font throughout the entire book while changing weights if needed because this would allow for the consistency that I wanted to keep. I also used a body monospaced font, which is the font type that we often associate with the typewriter font. I chose this because I wanted to give the effect that I was typing in a journal myself, which is also why I used much of my handwriting.





I had my first panic attack at five years old. At the time, I don't think I understood what it was, but I look back and realize that the feeling

in my chest and the jitters that I had when something was upsetting me was not a typical response to uncertain situations for a five year old.



**I was five years old when anxiety took me in it's hardened hands and told me that I was theirs.**

**Why do I fear everything I don't know?  
Why am I so afraid of the unknown?**

I was twenty-one when I began to indulge this fascination. I explored the thrill-seeking side of myself, I stopped

worrying so much and it finally dawned on me. Not everyone felt the same way about the unknown that I did. Not everyone was afraid.

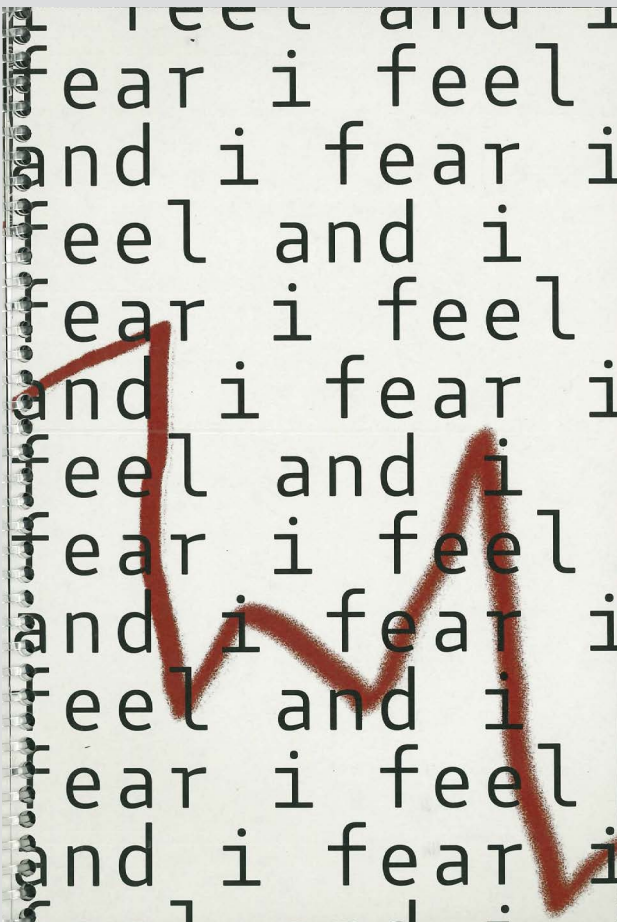
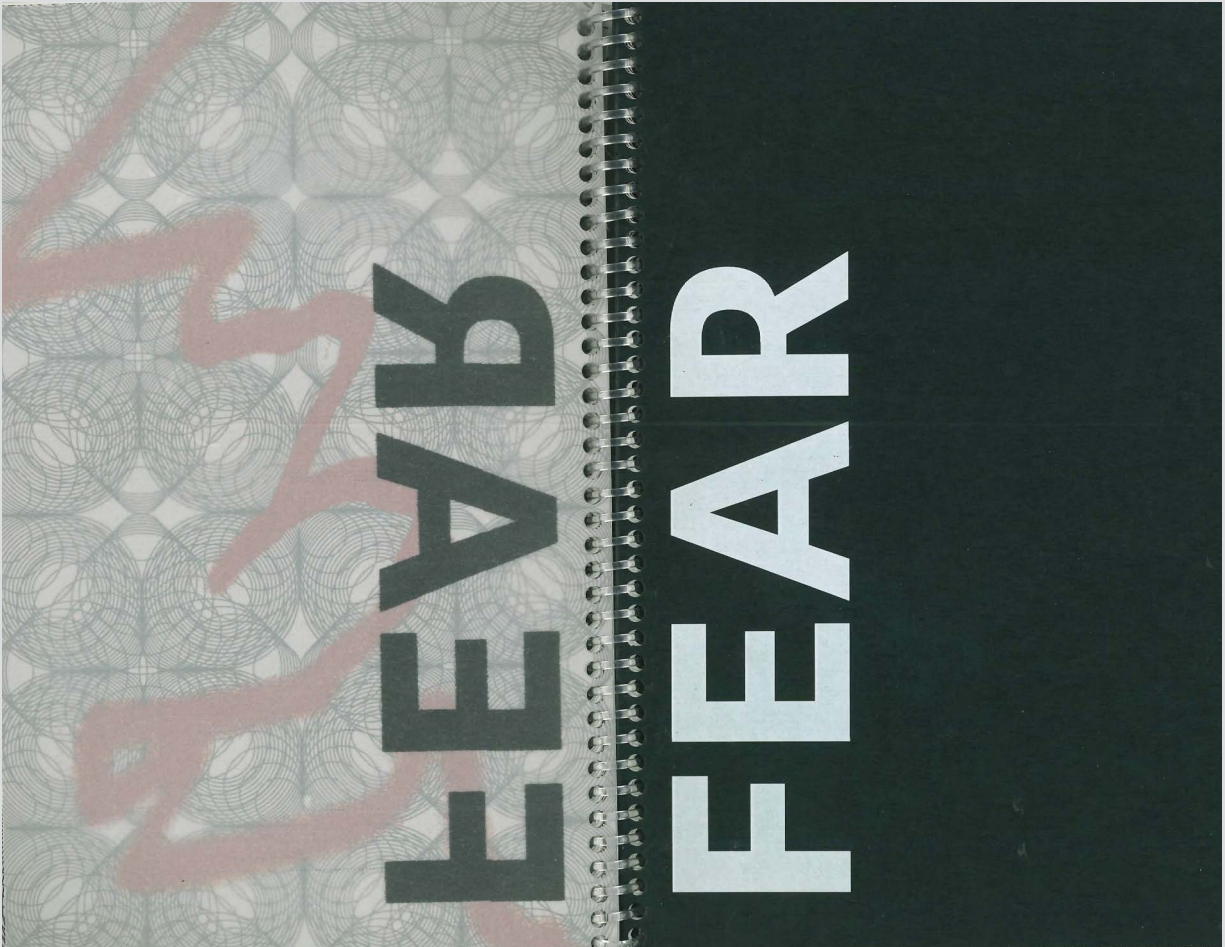


It was nuanced and complex because there are so many different ideas around what we don't know and I was desperate to know more.

it is  
simply  
human  
nature  
to  
fear

The narrative of this book was intended to be through my lens of anxiety and narrating my and other's experiences. I found that this was effective in making the book feel personal and the responses that I received from readers were positive because they felt like I was telling them a story. The publication was printed on a mix of gray, white, and black paper with black, red, and white ink. I wanted to keep this simple because the designs and story were complicated and I didn't want to overwhelm the reader with too much visual information.

The book is split into three chapters. The first is my narrative which tells the story of my relationship with the unknown and anxiety from when I was a child to today and why I felt inclined to make this project. The second chapter is looking at the unknown through the lens of fear. I compiled the responses that I received from others here that lent more to the fear and anxiety of the unknown. This chapter had a much darker tone with overwhelming patterns, jagged lines, and bold text. The last chapter was looking through the lens of hope. This was much brighter, less overwhelming with lots of blank space and flowing lines. I found the way that I split this up was effective with readers because when looking at the fear portion, readers found it stressful and visually overstimulating, which was the goal. The hope portion was much more of a calm relief that readers found like a breath of fresh air.



The way my research applied to this is in how the book is laid out. When initially forming this concept, I wasn't sure what responses would be like, but once I collected them, I knew that there needed to be a chapter divide based on emotions. The rorschach test and the stress test both contributed in understanding the fear elements and what type of questions to ask in my survey.

i think

i'm starting

to feel okay

with the idea

of dying

i can recall  
being in  
new mexico  
with my dad,  
looking up  
at the night  
sky, and  
feeling so  
very small.

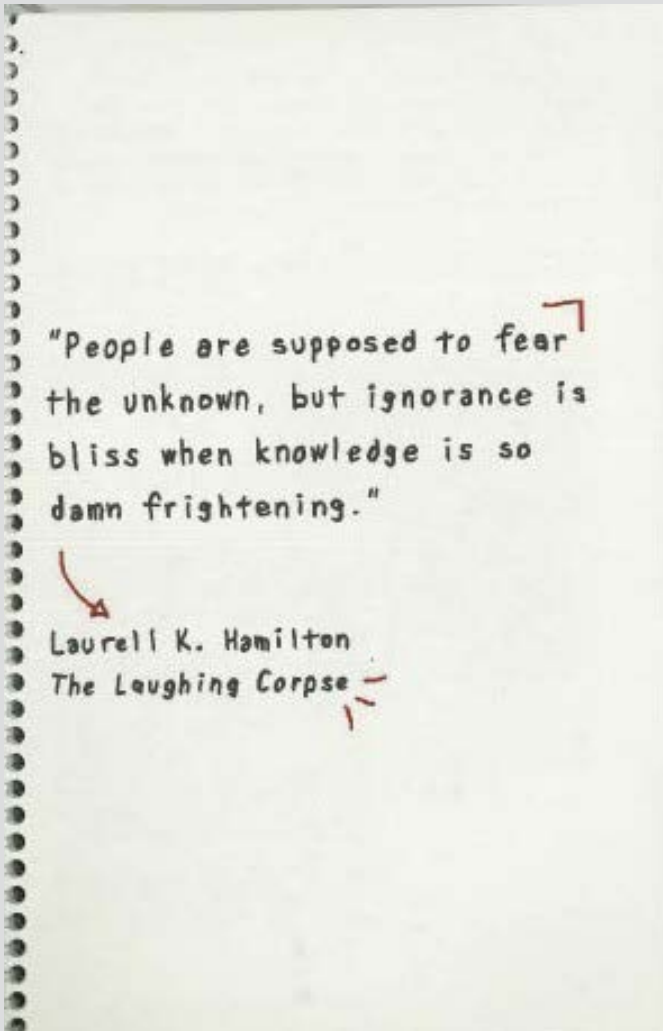
we learn more  
about the cosmos  
every day, but  
there is still  
so much that is  
unknown. the  
cloudless desert

sky was  
a stark  
reminder  
that  
there  
is so  
much yet  
to be  
known.

# Conclusion

Overall, the results of this publication translated the information that I had in a very effective way, and even though I did not use all of my research in the content of the book, much of it still had an effect when creating the visual identity of the publication.

In this project on the exploration of our feelings around the unknown, I not only learned more about other perspectives on something I fear, but I also had to approach my fear in making a public publication with incredibly personal subject matter. Through this process, I answered my question in a way I didn't think I would. Instead of learning about how others fear the unknown, I also learned how others love it and I, too gained an appreciation for it, even if the construction of a whole publication was intimidating. Art is vulnerable and often scary to share with the world, but this publication supported me not fearing the unknown that would come from it.



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