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## Section Introduction: Beyond the Rigid Confines

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# BEYOND THE RIGID

# CONFINES

A tremendous power lies within us all—the power to connect and identify with the unique characteristics that produce our budding sense of self and place in this unpredictable world. Too often, however, we are fearful of breaking away from the “norm,” intimidated by others’ perceptions rather than coming to terms with our own individuality. In a society that encourages and upholds homogeneity, it can be challenging for an individual to openly accept his or her true self without the fear of being branded as “different.”

The contributing authors of this section embody the enormous courage that is necessary for braving and confronting the criticisms of diversity which flood our everyday interactions. Ingrained within each of these pieces is the notion that one’s sense of self, often highly altered by societal misperceptions and expectations, can sometimes fail in representing one’s true identity. These stories represent the fluidity of identity, not as a static, unchangeable state but rather as a continual evolution, shaped and expanded throughout our journeys toward self-discovery.

Each of the selected stories in this section illustrates the achievement of a more profound self-knowledge through active reflection. Nashwah Ahmed begins the section with a reflection on the work of Nigerian-born

photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode, who challenges cultural norms about race and sexuality.

“A Father’s Smile” by Benjamin Fox and “Piled High” by Laurie Thompson portray the anguish an individual can experience when witnessing a loved one encountering turmoil in his or her life—a life contained within an outline of who one desires be, but not who they desire to be. The authors of these two pieces act as outside observers peering through the cracks of the undoubtedly despondent times experienced by family members. They reflect on the most memorable moments of their childhoods, revealing how their identities have been formed through their own unique familial experiences.

In “Awakening,” readers are exposed to the harmful ramifications of the labeling of mental disorders and the ways in which this classification system may inadvertently stigmatize an entire population of individuals. Wendy Reynolds questions the pigeonholing effect of grouping particular people or experiences as “normal” and others as “abnormal.”

We hope these stories will motivate you to tap into your own power to identify yourself beyond the rigid confines of society’s guidelines, so that you may be able to obtain a more sincere sense of your own self.

—Madison Firkey, Richelle Gewertz,  
and Aidan Kelley

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