



Covering

In the book *Covering*, Kenji Yoshino introduces the concept of “covering.” To cover is to downplay aspects of our identity that make us different from mainstream society. The following excerpts (a blend of material from the book’s preface and first chapter) introduce the concept of covering and why it is important.

[To cover is to downplay aspects of our identity that make us different from mainstream society. Kenji Yoshino argues that, although we live in an age where the law prohibits many forms of discrimination, people still face pressure to hide who they are.]

Everyone covers. To cover is to tone down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream. In our increasingly diverse society, all of us are outside the mainstream in some way. Nonetheless, being deemed mainstream is still often a necessity of social life. For this reason, every reader of this book has covered, whether consciously or not, and sometimes at significant personal cost.

Famous examples of covering abound. Ramon Estevez covered his ethnicity when he changed his name to Martin Sheen, as did Krishna Bhanji when he changed his name to Ben Kingsley. Margaret Thatcher covered her status as a woman when she trained with a voice coach to lower the timbre of her voice. Long after they came out as lesbians, Rosie O’Donnell and Mary Cheney still covered, keeping their same-sex partners out of the public eye. Issur Danielovitch Demsky covered his Judaism when he became Kirk Douglas, as did Joseph Levitch when he became Jerry Lewis. Franklin Delano Roosevelt covered his disability by ensuring his wheelchair was always hidden behind a desk before his Cabinet entered.

I doubt any of these people covered willingly. I suspect they were all bowing to an unjust reality that required them to tone down their stigmatized identities to get along in life. ...

All civil rights groups feel the bite of the covering demand. African-Americans are told to “dress white” and to abandon “street talk”; Asian-Americans are told to avoid seeming “fresh off the boat”; women are told to “play like men” at work and to make their child-care responsibilities invisible; Jews are told not to be “too Jewish”; Muslims, especially after 9/11, are told to drop their veils and their Arabic; the disabled are told to hide the paraphernalia they use to manage their disabilities.

In a supposedly enlightened age, the persistence of the covering demand presents a puzzle. Today, race, national origin, sex, religion, and disability are all protected by federal civil rights laws. An increasing number of states and localities include sexual orientation in civil rights laws as well. Albeit with varying degrees of conviction, Americans have come to a consensus that people should not be penalized for being different along these dimensions. That consensus, however, does not protect individuals against demands that they mute those differences....

Covering is a hidden assault on our civil rights. ... if we look closely, we will see that covering is the way many groups are being held back today. The reason racial minorities are pressured to “act white” is because of white supremacy. The reason women are told to downplay their child-care responsibilities in the workplace is because of patriarchy. And the reason gays are asked not to “flaunt” is because of homophobia. So long as such covering demands persist, American civil rights will not have completed its work.

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