



Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights

Kenji Yoshino

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In this remarkable and elegant work, acclaimed Yale Law School professor Kenji Yoshino fuses legal manifesto and poetic memoir to call for a redefinition of civil rights in our law and culture.

Everyone covers. To cover is to downplay a disfavored trait so as to blend into the mainstream. Because all of us possess stigmatized attributes, we all encounter pressure to cover in our daily lives. Given its pervasiveness, we may experience this pressure to be a simple fact of social life.

Against conventional understanding, Kenji Yoshino argues that the demand to cover can pose a hidden threat to our civil rights. Though we have come to some consensus against penalizing people for differences based on race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, and disability, we still routinely deny equal treatment to people who refuse to downplay differences along these lines. Racial minorities are pressed to “act white” by changing their names, languages, or cultural practices. Women are told to “play like men” at work. Gays are asked not to engage in public displays of same-sex affection. The devout are instructed to minimize expressions of faith, and individuals with disabilities are urged to conceal the paraphernalia that permit them to function. In a wide-ranging analysis, Yoshino demonstrates that American civil rights law has generally ignored the threat posed by these covering demands. With passion and rigor, he shows that the work of civil rights will not be complete until it attends to the harms of coerced conformity.

At the same time, Yoshino is responsive to the American exasperation with identity politics, which often seems like an endless parade of groups asking for state and social solicitude. He observes that the ubiquity of the covering demand provides an opportunity to lift civil rights into a higher, more universal register. Since we all experience the covering demand, we can all make common cause around a new civil rights paradigm based on our desire for authenticity—a desire that brings us together rather than driving us apart.

Yoshino’s argument draws deeply on his personal experiences as a gay Asian American. He follows the Romantics in his belief that if a human life is described with enough particularity, the universal will speak through it. The result is a work that combines one of the most moving memoirs written in years with a landmark manifesto on the civil rights of the future.

“This brilliantly argued and engaging book does two things at once, and it does them both astonishingly well. First, it’s a finely grained memoir of young man’s struggles to come to terms with his sexuality, and second, it’s a powerful argument for a whole new way of thinking about civil rights and how our society deals with difference. This book challenges us all to confront our own unacknowledged biases, and it demands that we take seriously the idea that there are many different ways to be human. Kenji Yoshino is the face and the voice of the new civil rights.” -Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed*

“Kenji Yoshino has not only given us an important, compelling new way to understand civil rights law, a major accomplishment in itself, but with great bravery and honesty, he has forged his argument from the cauldron of his own experience. In clear, lyrical prose, *Covering* quite literally brings the law to life. The result is a book about our public and private selves as convincing to the spirit as it is to the mind.” -Adam Haslett, author of *You Are Not A Stranger Here*

“Kenji Yoshino's work is often moving and always clarifying. *Covering* elaborates an original, arresting account of identity and authenticity in American culture.”
-Anthony Appiah, author of *The Ethics of Identity* and Laurance S. Rockefeller University Professor Of

Philosophy at Princeton University

“This stunning book introduces three faces of the remarkable Kenji Yoshino: a writer of poetic beauty; a soul of rare reflectivity and decency; and a brilliant lawyer and scholar, passionately committed to uncovering human rights. Like W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, this book fearlessly blends gripping narrative with insightful analysis to further the cause of human emancipation. And like those classics, it should explode into America's consciousness.”

-Harold Hongju Koh Dean, Yale Law School and former Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights

“*Covering* is a magnificent work - so eloquently and powerfully written I literally could not put it down. Sweeping in breadth, brilliantly argued, and filled with insight, humor, and erudition, it offers a fundamentally new perspective on civil rights and discrimination law. This extraordinary book is many things at once: an intensely moving personal memoir; a breathtaking historical and cultural synthesis of assimilation and American equality law; an explosive new paradigm for transcending the morass of identity politics; and in parts, pure poetry. No one interested in civil rights, sexuality, discrimination - or simply human flourishing - can afford to miss it.”

-Amy Chua, author of *World on Fire*

“In this stunning, original book, Kenji Yoshino demonstrates that the struggle for gay rights is not only a struggle to liberate gays---it is a struggle to free all of us, straight and gay, male and female, white and black, from the pressures and temptations to cover vital aspects of ourselves and deprive ourselves and others of our full humanity. Yoshino is both poet and lawyer, and by joining an exquisitely observed personal memoir with a historical analysis of civil rights, he shows why gay rights is so controversial at present, why “covering” is the issue of contention, and why the “covering demand,” universal in application, is the civil rights issue of our time. This is a beautifully written, brilliant and hopeful book, offering a new understanding of what is at stake in our fight for human rights.”

-Carol Gilligan, author of *In a Different Voice*

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