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# Assimilation at the Cost of Authenticity

## Kenji Yoshino's

### *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (Random House 2006)

Reviewed by Rebecca K. Lee

*I had always been able to leap for him. From the days when he would open his arms to me in the swimming pool to the days when he told me I could go to Exeter, or Harvard, or Oxford, I had trusted him, and leapt. If he could come to America at eighteen and become a professor, then I could do anything in my own country, the language that was my own. But where was I now? I could not sit still to read a paragraph, I could barely force myself to eat. I sat before him stripped of my carapace of accomplishment, the turtle unturtled.*

*"I'm sorry, Papa," I finally said. "I can't do anything. I've failed. I have nothing." Then I paused. Could I say it? I could not. Something dull spoke instead: "I am nothing."*

*I felt him before I heard him. It was not his usual brisk embrace, but as if, in the warm parentheses of his arms, he had made me part of him.*

*He said: "You are my son."*

*And I began to sob.<sup>1</sup>*

Writing from a place of courage and conviction lifted from doubt and pain, author Kenji Yoshino emotively sheds layers of his covered self to make real his case for human authenticity in his recent book *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*. Yoshino, a dean and law professor at Yale, offers us a work that infuses cultural insight into legal argumentation, interlaced with his own exquisitely narrated

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*Rebecca K. Lee is a practicing attorney in Washington, D.C. She received a B.A. from the University of Chicago in 1997 and worked as a teacher with Teach for America. She earned an M.P.P. degree in 2001 from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and served as the co-managing editor of the Asian American Policy Review. Lee obtained her J.D. from the Georgetown University Law Center in 2004, where she was editor-in-chief of the Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy. Her academic work on civil rights and gender equality has been published in the Brooklyn Law Review and William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law. Her most recent manuscript will be published in the Columbia Journal of Gender and Law in the summer of 2006.*

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story as a gay, Asian American man. As the excerpt above demonstrates, the halting conversations that he has with his Japanese-immigrant parents are among the most poignant parts of the book and, for Yoshino, a master of language owing to his poetic dexterity, quite difficult even for him, as he admits, to fully convey in words.

In this book, Yoshino elaborates on the concept of “covering” as termed by sociologist Erving Goffman, explaining that covering is the act of downplaying a disfavored identity—even when this identity is known or apparent to others—in order to present oneself more palatably as part of the so-called American mainstream. For instance, a person of color may cover his or her race or ethnicity by adopting an Anglicized name to replace one that is perceived as foreign, speaking only English even when he or she is bilingual, or majoring in American literature rather than in a particular field within ethnic studies. Yoshino begins his discussion from the vantage point of gay covering as this relates most closely to his own experience, followed by a broader examination of other forms of group identity-based covering: racial covering, sex-based covering, disability-based covering, and religious covering. All of these behaviors may seem harmless, and even beneficial in the name of American assimilation, but Yoshino maintains that the cultural imperative to conform to dominant-group norms is the under-noticed harm of assimilation—a harm that impedes the full advancement of historically marginalized groups. To illustrate his point, he provides examples of racial and ethnic minorities who feel compelled to cover by imitating White norms in order to achieve mainstream markers of success. When they challenge such covering demands by bringing race-discrimination claims in court, they commonly lose. To be clear, Yoshino does not thoughtlessly devalue assimilation as he acknowledges that it is a necessary part of social life. He nonetheless wants us to seriously consider the ways in which assimilation serves to undermine the goals of the civil-rights movement by maintaining the cultural status quo of the dominant groups.

Yoshino posits that individuals cover along four axes of behavior: appearance, affiliation, activism, and association. He describes how his parents encouraged him to cover his Japanese racial identity in America but to reverse cover this same identity when visiting Japan. At boarding school and in college, Yoshino followed this advice, choosing to distance himself from ethnic courses, causes, and groups on campus. Only later as a law professor did he begin to critically reconsider particular forms of racial covering that he had earlier viewed as benign. Relaying the story of a Black lawyer who diligently worked at covering his race, Yoshino finds that even those who noiselessly cover do so at considerable personal sacrifice and without guaranteed acceptance into society’s center.

To address the problem of covering on a legal level, Yoshino advocates for a new model of civil rights based largely on the concept of universal liberty. This model would uphold the rights of all people to act in certain ways or be different, in contrast to the current paradigm that rests on equality rights for historically oppressed groups. He notes the value of accommodation rights for existing traditional civil-rights groups, but given that every person covers in some way to be seen as “normal,” he places more emphasis on a new understanding of civil rights that would allow all individuals to put forth their authentic selves. Yoshino’s de-prioriti-

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zation of traditional civil rights raises concerns because it could be understood to suggest that discrimination against people of color, women, gays, the disabled, and religious minorities no longer is a serious problem. At the same time, Yoshino's larger point may be not so much to minimize the continuing importance of protecting historically disadvantaged groups as it is to extend the relevance of coerced covering to all individuals, as he aims to underscore our commonalities rather than differences.

According to Yoshino, each of our own inner searches for the authentic self "is the most important work we can do."<sup>2</sup> While it is clear that the quest for authenticity is central in Yoshino's life, it is unclear that this search is a crucial concern in the lives of others—for instance, those who are faced with more urgent troubles such as poverty, violence, and sickness, and the individuals who labor to help them. Yoshino admits that his endeavors have stemmed more from a need for self-protection than from distress about the plight of others, and his personal suffering explains why he has concentrated on inward-looking pursuits. Nevertheless, as Yoshino maintains, embracing one's authentic identity is consequential for full human prospering.

Concerned that his argument may unwittingly reinforce rather than dispel stereotypes based on "essential" identity traits, Yoshino cautions that we should not assume that everybody who engages in acts of assimilation is covering. Instead, he asserts that what is understood to be authentic is something to be determined by each person for herself or himself, without a static notion of what this should entail. Admittedly, his proposition that we harness our true selves may appear to be an abstract exercise, one that can be difficult to execute in practice because we are inevitably influenced by others in terms of who we think we are and who we project ourselves to be. Yet in other ways, the task may feel primarily visceral, as Yoshino's coming-out narrative movingly reveals.

Keenly aware of the law's limitations, however, Yoshino wants civil rights to move beyond the law and become the work of lawyers and nonlawyers alike. Bringing together the greater objective of civil rights and his vision of universal human flourishing, he wants to bring the concept of covering into the common vernacular. He urges us to take part in what he calls "reason-forcing conversations" in which the individual faced with a covering demand asks the demander why he or she should comply. Yoshino hopes such exchanges will prompt the demander to rethink the demand altogether, in light of the burdens it may place on the individual on the receiving end. These would not be courtroom debates, but informal discussions that occur in all other places people inhabit. He leaves it open to the participants to determine which reasons for covering will be regarded as justifiable, apart from grounds that illegitimately stem from bias. In the course of discussion, individuals may find that the traits of one uncovered self conflict with those of another to an extent not readily resolvable. Even so, Yoshino would insist, the conversation should continue to happen.

Given the cultural context of covering, it seems appropriate for Yoshino to prescribe a cultural cure, one that supplements rather than replaces legal remedies. His argument is appealing and significant because it articulates a substantive vision of civil rights that probes beneath surface discrimination to unearth layers of subtle

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discrimination that lie fertile. Yoshino's discourse-centered model further promotes a deliberative democracy in which individuals join in thoughtful dialogue to reach understanding on matters important to who they are and why they care. One might describe his proposal as the town-hall meeting *writ small*—consisting of informal but serious exchanges on a smaller scale to air out issues of mutual concern. Social change is born from such private discussions that build and spread, eventually leading to broader public perception.

*Covering* as a memoir and cultural critique showcases what an individual can achieve when he embraces his true self as he sees and feels it and the artistry with which one can express oneself in writing. The self that Yoshino uncovers in this book is—as his college poetry professor called him—“radiating,” but not naïve. Yoshino's project moves forward from the belief that one's perspective needs to be shared even though it may tend toward the utopian, because it will resonate with others. And a story properly heard is one that is not forgotten.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Yoshino, Kenji. 2006. *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*. New York: Random House, 56-57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

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