

EXPLORING IDENTITY: **Covering**

Objectives:

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.

Materials:

- Pen and Paper for each student
- Copies of attached essay and essay questions

Procedure:

As a group, read the excerpt below from Kenji Yoshino’s book *Covering*. Break students into small groups to discuss **Reading Questions**. After students have answered questions in small groups, reconvene and discuss as a whole.

Key Terms:

concept, downplay, aspects, mainstream, although, tone down, preface, disfavored, identity, increasingly, diverse, deemed, consciously, personal cost, timbre, public eye, ensuring, suspect, bowing, unjust, stigmatized, paraphernalia, manage, supposedly, enlightened age, persist, albeit, conviction, consensus, white supremacy, patriarchy, flaunt

ESSAY: “Covering”, Kenji Yoshino

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.

FACILITATOR READING QUESTIONS & ANSWER KEY

Question: How does Kenji Yoshino define “covering”?

Answer: To cover is to tone down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream.

Question: What are two examples of the demands of covering given in the text that are not protected by civil rights laws?

Answer: Examples might include Muslims hiding their religious garb in order to avoid post-9/11 targeting or women not talking about their family responsibilities in order to be taken more seriously by the men at work.

Question: “Everyone covers,” Yoshino claims. What does he say is our reason for covering? Share an example of how the demands of covering affect you.

Answer: Yoshino says we cover in order to be accepted and to get along in life. He writes that, because of power structures like white supremacy and patriarchy, the demands of covering remain in effect despite legally protected equal rights. Students’ views will vary.

Question: Yoshino writes that despite progress, “the covering demand presents a puzzle.” What does he mean?

Answer: Yoshino is speaking to the fact that, in a post-civil rights America, most minority groups have their rights protected by law but they still must assimilate, or cover, to get by in society despite these legal protections.

Question: Reread the final paragraph.

What rhetorical device does the author use in this paragraph to enforce the idea that “covering is a hidden assault on our civil rights”? Is the structure of this text effective?

READING QUESTIONS

1. How does Kenji Yoshino define “covering”?
2. What are two examples of the demands of covering given in the text that are not protected by civil rights laws?
3. “Everyone covers,” Yoshino claims. What does he say is our reason for covering? Share an example of how the demands of covering affect you.
4. Yoshino writes that despite progress, “the covering demand presents a puzzle.” What does he mean?
5. Reread the final paragraph. What rhetorical device does the author use in this paragraph to enforce the idea that “covering is a hidden assault on our civil rights”? Is the structure of this text effective?