

Interview with
Cloé Korman

You Look Like a Jew

[Tu ressembles à une juive]

This interview was carried out by AOC
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Cloé Korman, Tu ressembles à une juive
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Your book comes at a time when the reappraisal of work is becoming unavoidable. What was your starting point?

This book was born at a time of increasing violence in the French public space. In the winter of 2018-2019, there was a series of shocking acts of anti-Semitism: neo-Nazi tags in the streets of Paris, neo-Nazi salutes (the “quenelle” gesture) at yellow vest demonstrations, the desecration of the Jewish cemeteries of Herrlisheim and Quatzenheim in Alsace, etc. This violence was worsened by the tone of public debate, both by the association it created between Jewishness and defence of the State of Israël (encouraged by the French state itself when it proposed adding “Zionist” to the list of illegal anti-Semitic insults), and the culpable omission, accumulated over a decade, of other racisms. It felt like the climate of intellectual oppression was such that, even if I had wanted to denounce an anti-Semitic act, I would have been labelled as sectarian. What’s more, I wasn’t going to find the same allies to also denounce the racial segregation that my students from the north-east Paris suburbs are victim to. Walls were being put up in activist circles, and I felt an unbearable climate of censorship

What was your writing process?

There were two phases. The first draft was fairly spontaneous, and I shared it in stages with my friend Chayma Drira, an ex-student from the writing workshop, now a researcher in political sciences. I like the idea that the book was born in this context of friendship, under the gaze of another person of colour – she is Muslim, and I am Jewish – from a different social background – the poor Parisian suburbs where she grew up. In the second phase, I rewrote the text, and invited several people to reread it from their specific standpoint; the historian Pap Ndiaye, the sociologist Arnaud Esquerre, the writer Tiphaine Samoyault and many more, including activists and politicians. I am glad that there was this collective aspect to the writing of this book. Because by thinking about racism, I also wanted to succeed in doing something in terms of rhetoric: in a context where aggression and caricature are the dominant modes, I wanted to introduce a nuanced discourse, open to criticism, while remaining clear and capable of inciting action – and this is why I integrated these different dialogues.

Working in the social sciences also means participating in debates in which your role as a researcher is to challenge prejudice. What is a major misconception that you would like to see challenged?

It's still about the rhetoric. In this essay I drew from a specifically feminine – and incidentally minority – writing tradition: a form of essay that blends the personal with the political, that shares reflections while wandering the city, by anchoring words in the body. To this I owe Virginia Woolf, or more modern writers like the American Maggie Nelson.

However, this style is not without risks: it puts hesitation to the fore, and a certain emotionality that can be disparaged in the public eye, because it is not associated with the dominant image of authority in a paternalist society. So to me this text also defends a feminist cause: using a very personal and sensitive voice about a political subject is a question of intellectual honesty to me. Broadcasting that type of voice goes hand in hand with my argument; it is more tolerant, and it opens the door to a greater social and intellectual breadth of voices.