

Visualizing Postcolonial Africa in *La Vie de Pahé*

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In the introduction to his edited volume *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels* (2011), Michael Chaney points out that when life stories are accompanied by pictures as in autobiographical comic strips, they “produce new structures for the self to inhabit and through which to be expressed” (6). He comments that graphic narratives rely on “stylized” iconography that results in an explicit “departure from the ‘seemingly substantial’ effects of realism that traditional autobiographies presume.” Thus, the “I” of such an autobiography become an even more “substantial” presence. Chaney adds:

The larger consequences of this tension between objective and subjective truths in creating realistic fictions of the self prod us to reconsider what is at stake in telling our life stories in pictures and how it is that we have come to visualize identity in particular ways and according to particular sociohistorical contexts. (7)

Following Chaney’s argument, this essay will discuss two volumes of the French comic book, or *bande dessinée*, *La Vie de Pahé*, written by Pahé, an alias for the Gabonese comic book writer Patrick Essono Nkouna. In his autobiographical comic books, Pahé uses text and image to tell his personal narrative, within the context of postcolonial Africa. This essay will answer the following questions based on Pahé’s comic books: How does Pahé wed his coming-of-age story as a writer and artist with that of postcolonial Africa? In what way, does he recount the story of immigration and the treatment of Black Africans in France? How does his rhetorical style, as both narrator and commentator of his text, and his use of the *bande dessinée* format, enhance his narrative? We will also analyze how autobiography in drawn comic books makes the “I” of Pahé, an “even more ‘substantial’” presence and how, in very self-reflexive fashion, Pahé is the protagonist of his story, the “narrated I” (in the speech bubbles), and also author of his story, Chaney’s the “narrating I” (in the recitatives)¹ (Chaney 3).

¹ I will be using some of the terminology of comic books – frame-panel/*une case-une vignette*, un *récitatif*/recitative (found in rectangular boxes on top of below the frame), and speech bubble/balloon/*une bulle*.

In the two volumes of *La vie de Pahé* – volume 1 entitled *Bitam*, was published in 2006 and volume 2 *Paname* in 2008 – Pahé writes about family life, schooling, and the challenges of being a writer and illustrator of comic books. Born in the city of Bitam in the northern part of Gabon, Pahé shuttled between France and Gabon during his elementary, middle and high-school years. When in France, he stayed with his older sister Rose who was a medical student in Paris. He later studied art in Paris then worked as a cartoonist for several journals in Gabon such as *La Griffé*, *La Moustik* et *La Cigale enchantée*. He currently lives in Gabon.

The Belgian comic book editor Pierre Paquet became a fan of Pahé's work and intrigued by his life story asked him to illustrate it. Pahé accepted and is both writer and illustrator of these volumes, while the colors were done by Christophe Bouchard. The two volumes deal with the two cities in which he spent a large part of his life, his birthplace Bitam in the north of Gabon and Paname or Paris². At first, Pahé had agreed to write a third volume that was going to discuss his relationships with women, but then decided not to write volume three for personal reasons. Most recently, however, in his blog dated February 4, 2013, Pahé announced that he is currently working on volume 3: "Ma vie à moi, le 3. Ca y est c'est reparti, bien chaud, bien décidé, de terminer mon dernier opus de la vie qui raconte ma life à moi, en BD. D'ici 6 mois aux Éditions Paquet" (<http://pahebd.blogspot.com>). Both volumes have been well-received in the Francophone Europe and in some African countries. In 2009, it was turned into a serialized cartoon for the French television channel France 3 entitled, *Le Monde de Pahé*, "The World of Pahé." The show can be seen on television screens in France, Belgium and Switzerland. Pahé's blog announces that this serialized cartoon is screened in many African countries including Tchad, Congo, and Cameroon. However, it cannot be seen on Gabonese television. In an appearance in a program *Emission pluriel* on the Gabonese television station RTG 1, *Radiodiffusion Télévision Gabonaise*, on December 10, 2011, Pahé challenges the Gabonese government asking why his comic book had not been published in Gabon nor his cartoon spinoff aired on Gabonese television. Although he points out that the Gabonese prefer Brazilian soap operas, he asks ironically if his show was not being aired because of his bald head, his stupid mug (*gueule de con*), or because his text and illustrations are critical of the Gabonese government. He also registers his unhappiness that the Gabonese publishers who were going to publish his comic books in Gabon, with the preface written by the current president of Gabon, Ali Bongo, had not yet done so.

² Paname was a 19th century slang term for Paris that has regained popularity today.

Comics in Africa: A Brief Summary

Before entering into a discussion of the two comic books themselves, a brief overview of the history of the comic books in Africa is in order. French-language comic books in Africa are not a contemporary phenomenon. They have existed in Africa since colonial times. Some of the first comic books were written by European missionaries in Africa. After the independence of many African nations, during the late 1950s and 1960s, African comics existed in different forms – as political cartoons, as comic strips in newspapers and in specialized journals. In the 1970s, as dictatorships consolidated their rule in many African countries, censorship of writers and the press by the governments suppressed the publication of comics. The 1980s and 1990s saw a proliferation of comic books magazines and some individual comic books or *albums*. Madagascar and Senegal were the leaders in the publication of comic books or strips during these two decades. The democratization of many African countries saw the flourishing of comic strips in newspapers and the satirical press. Other comic strips were published by non-governmental organizations to educate people about health issues such as AIDS, with the help of African writers and illustrators. Starting in the 1980s, African artists joined together in associations with the aim of promoting their art. Several associations were formed in Africa and in Europe – *L'Afrique dessinée* in Paris run by the comic book artist Christophe N'Galle Edimo and *Afro-Bulles* in Belgium. These associations organized comic book fairs and exhibitions all over Africa. As publishing opportunities in Africa slowly dried up, the first decade of the 21st century saw the migration of several African comic books writers and illustrators to France and Belgium, either encouraged by NGOs, or by European comic book editors. Although some African comic book artists continue to self-publish in Africa, publishing continues to be a challenge in Africa and many African comic book writers are mainly published by European publishers.³

In their book, *Contemporary Francophone Writers and the Burden of Commitment* (2011), Odile Casenave and Patricia Célérier lament the fact that the African visual arts are generally ignored in the West and have suffered because of lack of funding and “cultural stereotyping” (139). They point out the success of the comic book *Aya de Youpougon* by the Franco-Ivorian writer Marguerite Abouet and her French illustrator, Clément Oubrerie, which was awarded the 2006 Prix du *premier album* at the *Festival International de la Bande*

³ This brief summary has been gleaned from Christophe Cassiau-Haurie and Christophe Meunier's *Cinquante années de bandes dessinées en Afrique francophone* and Massimo Repetti's article “African ‘ligne claire’: The Comics of Francophone Africa.” For more information, please consult these texts.

Dessinée at Angoulême: “...*Aya* was applauded for breaking away from the usual clichés associating the continent with war and famine” and portrays a nineteen-year old girl living a “normal” life in Abidjan. They compare this success to the positive reception of the Iranian French writer and illustrator Marjane Satrapi’s autobiographical graphic novel, *Persepolis* (2003). Despite Marguerite Abouet’s success, however, others such as Senegalese writer T.T. Fons’s (real name Alphonse Mendy) cartoon character Goorgoorlou, which has been a regular feature of the Senegalese satirical magazine *Le Cafard libéré*, and has also been made into a popular television series, has not received much attention outside the African continent, while the more recent *Malamine, un Africain à Paris* by Edimo and Simon-Pierre Mbembo has received critical, but not commercial success in France (Casenave and Célérier 140).

Breaking Away from Stereotypes

Pahé’s autobiographical tale, told and illustrated in a non-linear fashion, breaks through spatio-temporal and geographical barriers that often shift from frame to frame. Although his narrative follows a chronologically linear trajectory in the telling of his life-story, it is interspersed with vignettes dealing with various subjects related to African history. Consequently, he frames his own search for identity as a man, a comic book writer, an African, and a world citizen within the socio-political context of 20th and 21st century Africa.

The notion of the merging of the narrated I with the narrating I, as explained by Chaney above, is demonstrated on the first page of Pahé’s first volume. It opens in 21st century Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. On the first page and second frame of the album, Pahé is informed by a friend that: “...y a un blanc bizzaroïde qui veut te voir.” A couple of frames later, he meets the editor, Pierre Paquet, and two frames later, we see Pahé working at his desk, stating the aim of the project in the recitative: “Le deal était simple: Pierre voulait que je lui raconte en 3 tomes de B.D ma vie de merde. J’ai accepté ce défi fou, histoire de voir ce que cela donnerait par la suite!!!” In the speech bubble he states, “...Et voilà! Me voici sur ma table à dessin, mon cul bien calé sur une chaise prêt à vous raconter une partie de moi...un peu de ma vie, La Vie de Pahé! Attention...Action!” (1.1).⁴ In this frame, Pahé reveals a part, a “little bit” of his life as one would in a film. By introducing his life story using cinematic vocabulary, Pahé is emphasizing the visual over the textual -

⁴ Citations from Pahé’s comic books are followed by volume number and page number written in parentheses.

he is the director and actor of the film about his life that he is about to screen for his readers/viewers.

This essay will now focus on three thematic issues that Pahé discusses in his life story – schooling and education both in France and Gabon, his critique of the governments in Congo and Gabon, and his portrait of France and especially its treatment of black African immigrants – to demonstrate how Pahé’s personal story/history (*histoire*) told in text and image reflects postcolonial African society.

Schooling in Gabon and France

In his two volumes, Pahé turns a critical eye toward schooling both in Gabon and in France and uses it to discuss questions of identity and place. It takes up a large part of his narrative. Interestingly enough, one of the justifications the French used to colonize countries especially in Africa was the *mission civilisatrice*, or the civilizing mission. One of the ways they did this was by imposing the French educational system in the countries they colonized to such an extent that African children recited lines like, “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois” from French textbooks that had no connection to their own experiences growing up in Africa. Pahé comments on his own education as he moves back and forth between Gabon and France during his primary and middle school years, attending public, private and Catholic schools in both countries. A bright and independent child, Pahé found his teachers rigid and uninspiring, as the examples below will demonstrate. The first school Pahé attends is kindergarten in his hometown of Bitam. He has a difficult time adjusting because he does not speak French. He is critical of the curriculum, especially the silly, childish songs the students are forced to sing, preferring to spend his time drawing on the walls, humorously presented as his first attempts of what was to be his future career as an illustrator and cartoonist. Although his drawings are admired by his classmates, the teacher is not pleased. She tells him: “Répète après-moi 8 fois, je ne dessinerai plus,” which he ignores since he answers with “mouf,” repeated eight times in the speech bubble. He places an asterisk after that word that he translates for the reader at the bottom of the frame as “mon oeil” (1.9), indicating that he could not care less about the teacher’s reaction.⁵

The primary school he attends in France is no better than the one in Gabon. In this school, Pahé stands out because he is black. The students had

⁵ Pahé could be using *mon oeil*, literally, “my eye” (the equivalent of “my foot” in English), as a pun, since the teacher, the authority figure here, is telling him not to draw any more pictures, thus discouraging his, Pahé the artist’s, artistic and visual skills.

not seen a black African before: “Il est tout noir!” They exclaim incredulously and mouth stereotypical views of Africans as savages [“sauvages”], Tarzan, and cannibals [“cannibales”] (1.32). On his return to Libreville, the capital of Gabon, Pahé is placed in a public school. He is mocked by both the teacher and the students because his African identity has been tainted by his stay in France. Pahé’s sarcastic condemnation of the teacher is clear when he states in the recitative: “Le maître, en bon pédagogue, m’aide beaucoup pour que je m’intègre.” In the speech bubble we read how the teacher introduces Pahé to the class: “Je vous présente le petit Français Gabonais.” The classmates respond with, “le blanc- le blanc – Le blanc...” (1.36). Given his bi-cultural identity, Pahé finds that he is a misfit in schools both in France and Gabon.

As Pahé argues with his teachers and fights with his classmates his grades suffer and he is placed in another school, an “école mixte”, a school that is reserved for whites only and later admitted blacks from well-to-do families. The school had more white students than black and all the teachers were white. However, he still found the teachers saying ridiculous things. One white teacher tells him his black ancestors were also Gauls: “Vos ancêtres les noirs... ce sont aussi les gaulois.” In the next frame, Pahé draws the picture of Astérix and Obélix, the protagonists from the French cartoonists Goscinny and Uderzo’s popular comic book series about the inhabitants of the only village in Gaul (as France was known at the time) that had resisted French occupation. The speech bubble states ironically: “Super!! je suis le petits-fils d’Astérix.” (1.42). In this frame, Pahé makes several points without the need for text - the first and most obvious one shows that Pahé is clearly not the descendant of Astérix or Obélix. As a black African, he does not physically resemble the comic book characters Astérix and Obélix, who were white. The second point shows his awareness of the genealogy of comic books. He is paying homage to the comic book writers who preceded him and whom he admires, in this instance, Goscinny and Uderzo, the authors of the Astérix comic book series. A third reason for bringing Astérix and Obélix (literally) into the picture could be to show his resistance to an occupying or imperialist power, in this case of the French in Africa. However, above and beyond the points mentioned above, Pahé’s critique is directed toward the inconsistencies in the educational systems in France and Gabon. To prove that point, in the very next frame, he draws a picture of a black African public school teacher informing his class that their ancestors are Bantous (Pahé remarks that the teacher may have been drunk at that time, suggesting that it was because he was drunk that he dared to state that). In the frame that follows, like he did with Astérix and Obélix earlier, Pahé conjures up an image of the great African warrior, Shaka Zulu (1.43). Neither image mirrors his experience. As someone who had spent time in Gabon and France, Pahé’s identity is considerably more complex. He is

both Gabonese and French, having spent time in both countries, and is critical of the teachers in the different schools who perpetuate simplistic notions of identity.

Views on Africa and Africans

Pahé's critique of the educational system in Gabon is merely one aspect of his broader socio-political critique of postcolonial Africa. Most of his views on Africa are shown in a series of vignettes that disrupt his personal narrative

His first critique is directed towards the practice of polygamy. In the early pages of volume 1, the object of his ridicule is his own father who had several wives. In one of those frames, we see an image of his father and his ten wives who are raising their fists at him stating: "Un vrai polygame." In the next frame, we see Pahé's father unsuccessfully trying to spend equal time with his wives. Here, however, the text and image convey contradictory messages. While the recitative reads: "...la cohabitation entre co-épouses se passait à merveille" (1.4), the accompanying image shows the opposite – two of the wives are trading insults at each other. The children do not get along well either. Finally, Pahé's mother leaves his father with her four daughters from a previous marriage and returns to her own home taking up a job as a saleswoman. We hear very little of the father in the rest of the comic book, and not surprisingly, Pahé's main influences and support system are the women in his family, especially his mother and older sisters, Florence and Rose.

Pahé's critique of colonial and postcolonial African, specifically Gabonese and Congolese political culture, are written and drawn as digressions from his own life story. Thus in volume 1, we see Pahé, the adult cartoonist trying to explain Gabonese politics to his editor Paquet. He explains the absolute power of the Gabonese president Omar Bongo and his one party rule. The PDG (*Parti Démocratique Gabonais*) and Omar Bongo ruled Gabon since its independence in the 1960. He was fêted every March 12 with parades and hymn and did not tolerate any opposition.⁶ In volume two, Pahé draws images of the strikes in the 1990s that opposed Bongo's dictatorship and shut down the entire city, including the schools. Pahé himself is fired by magazines for which he works for drawing cartoons that are critical of Bongo and his regime and condemns the lack of freedom of speech in Gabon. As he writes in

⁶ Pahé's two volumes of *La vie de Pahé* were published in 2006 and 2008 respectively, when the Gabonese dictator Omar Bongo was in still in power. He died in 2009 and was succeeded by his son Ali Bongo, the current President of Gabon.

the recitative: “Au Gabon, quand on est dessinateur, prière de ne jamais faire de dessin outrageant à l’encontre de Papa Bongo” (2.65).

Pahé also highlights disparities of income between the rich and poor in postcolonial Gabon, observing satirically: “...le Gabon est un pays riche en pétrole, c’est pour ça qu’il y a encore beaucoup de bidonvilles...” (1.35).⁷ The very presence of a natural resource such as oil creates social disparities, and money is made by those few who control its production and distribution. To illustrate those disparities, in the next frame Pahé draws a portly, wealthy man standing near his car, his fists full of money, looking down on a skinny, poor compatriot. Pahé shows other social inequalities when on his first visit to Libreville, he stays with an uncle in a *bidonville* in the outskirts of town and not in one of the lovely oceanfront homes in the capital city.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) becomes an object of Pahé’s critique when he travels to Kinshasa, the capital for a comic book festival to which he is invited in the 1990s. To get to Kinshasa, he has to pass through Congo-Brazzaville. He has no trouble crossing this border because as a Gabonese citizen he is a “bokilo,” or brother-in-law since Omar Bongo, the President of Gabon, had married the daughter of Denis Sassou, the President of Congo-Brazzaville.

He has more trouble entering Kinshasa and is forced to bribe an official who insists that he needs a vaccination to cross the border. Pahé observes sarcastically: “Le problème de vaccin est réglé avec un billet de 1000F que sa main avale aussitôt. Deux secondes plus tard, je suis vacciné à coups de tampons!!” (1.58). Both image and text, the pun on the word *vacciner*, and the official rubber-tamping his passport make a strong impact on the reader. By highlighting the corrupt immigration official in the DRC, Pahé is pointing to the general culture of corruption among government officials in African countries.

Later, in a narrative within a narrative, Pahé meets a young lady in Kinshasa who recounts the history of Congo including its colonial past. In the next couple of pages, in a kind of flashback, Pahé illustrates the Congolese dictator Mobutu Sese Seko’s ascent to power. Mobutu ruled Congo, that he renamed Zaire, with an iron fist from independence until his forced exile in 1997 (he died three months later). In one frame, we see Mobutu humbly asking a Belgian officer for a job at the “Office National pour l’Emploi.” The officer asks him : “Président à vie, ça te dit?” (2.7). The recitative in the next

⁷ By using the term *bidonville*, or slum, in the context of Gabon being an oil-rich country, Pahé could be punning on the word *bidon*, as in *bidon de pétrole*, or oil container.

frame reads: "...Mobutu dirigea le pays d'une main de fer, imposant sa loi" (2.7). In order to consolidate his power and to enhance the myth of his god-like power, he has a plane shower down *manioc* (cassava) to his starving people who thought that the food was falling from the heavens. Pahé draws Mobutu complete with his trademark leopard skin hat and his throne covered in a leopard skin. The caption reads, "Mobutu, Roi du Zaïre" (2.8). Pahé's critique of Mobutu's despotic rule and Congo's Belgian colonizers who put him there are made forcefully in both text and image.

Both volumes also stress inter-African rivalries, mainly between Malians and Gabonese, and we see instances of this in Gabon and in France. Pahé's highlighting of inter-African rivalries is an extension of his critique of the economic and political corruption in the African continent that keeps it in a perpetual state of underdevelopment and prevents it from achieving its full potential. In volume 1, when little Pahé is living at his uncle's home in a slum of Libreville, Gabon's capital, the children make fun of and trick the local Malian grocer into giving them free food. Later, in Paris, Pahé is critical of a Malian immigrant, Mamadou. He meets Mamadou in a dormitory for international residents, where he, his wife and two daughters live in single room. Mamadou, who has lived in France for many years considers himself French and is offended if he is addressed as a Malian. As Pahé writes in the recitative: "Mamadou est français depuis qu'à la préfecture il a appris que tous ceux qui sont nés avant les indépendances sont français, ..." (2.47). Working as a security guard at the French store *Prisunic*, he proudly sends home pictures of himself in a security guard uniform and considers himself a success story. Pahé is critical of Mamadou's behavior and his abuse of France's social security system. In one frame, we see Mamadou gleefully encouraging his wife to have a child every year so that they could receive the special stipend, or *allocation familiale* that families receive from the French government to take care of their children. He is equally critical of some of his Gabonese compatriots who live in the residence. They have no scruples about consuming food that Pahé buys and places in their refrigerator because he does not own one. The majority are students or interns who have been sent to France by the Gabonese government and have no intention of returning to Gabon. As Pahé comments in a recitative: "Ils sont sympas mes grands-frères mais il va falloir rapidement...que je me paie mon frigo!!" (2.49).

Other incidents include the hostility he faces at the French embassy in Libreville, which he visits to pick up his invitation to attend the comic book festival, or *salon du livre de la BD de Kin*, that was to be held in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Here he is met by a compatriot who is rather rude. Pahé comments: "C'est bizarre mais j'ai

remarqué qu'à chaque consulat ou ambassade de France, il y a toujours un petit négro hyper arrogant, sans doute payé pour nous foutre la merde quand vous osez venir demander un renseignement fut-il le plus simple au monde" (1.52). Pahé's critique here is directed toward the officials and bureaucrats in postcolonial Africa who sometimes mimic the behavior of their colonial masters.

Pahé underscores the lack of self-awareness of Africans about how they are perceived by outsiders, mainly white people. When in the DRC to participate in a comic-book festival, Congolese soldiers enter Pahé's hotel room and accuse him of spying, especially when they see the collection of drawings he has made of the airport, the beach, and the soldiers. Among his effects they see a copy of the comic book *Tintin au Congo* by the Belgian artist Hergé that has been criticized by several critics as a racist, stereotypical portrayal of the Congolese people. While the officer in charge angrily stamps on the comic book calling it nonsense (*âneries*), a soldier laughs out loud as he flips through the comic book, disparaging Hergé for exaggerating the facial features of black Africans: "...on voit bien que le Moundélé [white man] qui fait ce livre n'est jamais venu en Afrique." In the next frame he asks: "Est-ce qu'on a des lèvres rouges comme ça?" (2.12). Not surprisingly, and here we have an instance of the image adding to the text, we see that the lips of the man on the cover of *Tintin in Congo* resemble those of the soldier. In the next frame, we see the officer beating up the soldier with the comic book.

Pahé's use of caricature in the above-mentioned frame has to be read in the larger context of the role of caricature itself. Discussing the purpose of caricature through history, the critic W. A. Coupe tells us that it has generally been seen as a way to emphasize the negative (86). Yet adds Coupe, "...most artists tend simply to draw an amusing distorted likeness, rather than to interpret the character of their victims negatively" (88). Caricature can also be equated with satire, according to Coupe, and, quoting the German poet-philosopher Friedrich Schiller, states that satire can be expressed in both a "punitive" or a serious way, or in a "laughing" or "playful" way (89). By exaggerating the facial features of the soldier in a few frames of his comic book to resemble those of Congolese in Hergé's comic book, Pahé is trying to present both sides of satire as expressed by Schiller. He is critiquing Hergé for his drawings that exaggerate the facial features of the black Congolese in *Tintin au Congo*, thus dehumanizing them, but he is also telling his compatriots that they should retain the ability to laugh at themselves. He is also making the case that artists should have the freedom to express themselves and censorship of any kind, even self-censorship, should not be the norm. Moreover, by exaggerating the facial features of the Congolese soldier in a few frames of *La Vie de Pahé*,

Pahé confronts the issue of racist stereotypes head on thus helping mitigate some of its harmful effects.

Views on France

Pahé's description of his schooling in France and Gabon takes up a large part of this coming-of-age narrative. We have seen above his condemnation of the rigid and unenlightened French schooling system. However, his multiple visits to France as a child and as an adult also allow him to observe French popular culture, French consumer culture, and the treatment of Black Africans by French authorities. He does this with irony and wit.

In volume one, he views France as an outsider and a child and is fascinated by the modern amenities of Western living – running hot water, toilets that flush, breakfast: “le petit déj’ une superbe invention! Fallait bien manger en France chaque matin. C’était la coutume laissée par leurs ancêtres Astérix et Obélix” (1.23). He comments on French popular culture – food and the packaging of food, television, cartoons, advertising, video games, and super and hypermarkets. He illustrates his visits to *Mammouth* and *Auchan*, two hypermarkets. Other cultural differences include the French treatment of pets and the concept of public parks. In France, Pahé is also introduced to American television shows such as “Starsky and Hutch,” and American pop stars like Michael Jackson. By highlighting the popularity of US popular culture in France, in the form of television shows and pop stars, Pahé is signaling to yet another form of imperialism, the cultural imperialism of United States.

Yet, although his first encounter with racism is in the classroom, Pahé's harshest critique is directed at the immigration officers at airports who consistently pick on black visitors for searches and interrogations. When he arrives in Paris to study art at the *Institut supérieur d'art et de publicité*, he states ironically in the recitative: “Fait étrange, à la sortie du tunnel seuls les noirs étaient les plus visés par le contrôles. Une habitude du pays certainement...” (2.34). Other comments directed at black passengers by the police at passport controls include: “Où avez-vous trouvé ce visa?” and “Z’êtes sûr que c’est vous sur la photo? Les noirs se ressemblent tellement” (2:35). Pahé also recounts an incident when a Black African Frenchman is stopped by authorities and asked to prove his citizenship. When it came to Pahé himself, although he had all the necessary paperwork to enter and stay in France, he was welcomed by the officer in the following manner: “Bon séjour en France et j’espère que vous n’allez pas y rester longtemps...” (2.35). It was clear that black immigrants are not welcomed by the French authorities.

Conclusion

In Pahé's personal story, or the part he chooses to discuss in his graphic narrative, the "I" becomes a "substantial presence," to use Chaney's words, and despite his economic, political and social critique of that continent, part of the collective story of postcolonial Africa. The comic book mode, that is, the use of text and image, as well as the autobiographical nature of large parts of the narrative, allow for the coming together of subjective and objective truths. Pahé is not afraid to criticize himself – he is after all discussing his "shitty life" as he states at the beginning – but is equally critical of the dishonesty, self-delusion, despotism, corruption, and racism in Africa and in France. At the same time, he does not flinch from condemning the ineffectual schooling systems in France and Gabon, the racism of the French immigration officials, the corruption of African authorities, the brutal dictatorial regimes in African countries, and the dishonesty of certain immigrant African families in France.

Although Pahé tells his story within the context of 20th and 21st century France and Africa, the final page of the second volume of *La vie de Pahé* positions him on the world stage. We see glum-faced Gabonese people in a market square in Libreville in a single frame that takes up an entire page. While the speech bubble announces the death of his beloved sister Florence, the recitative reads: "Libreville, le 10 septembre 2001...c'est ce jour-là que pour moi, le monde s'effondra!!!" (2.71). This premonitory cartoon announcing the collapse of Pahé, the author's world, foreshadows the events of the following day, September 11, 2001, a historical moment that had global reverberations.

Pahé's autobiographical *bande dessinée* paints a critical and complex picture of postcolonial Africa. His views on schooling in Gabon and France, his critique of contemporary Africa and Africans both in France and in Africa, and his portrayal of France's consumerist society and poor treatment of black Africans by French authorities provide a subjective view of these societies. What does Pahé achieve by telling his life-story using text and image? What conclusions can we draw from his *bande dessinée*? One possible conclusion is that, as Chaney suggests, our lives make sense if we "visualize identity" according to "particular sociohistorical contexts." Pahé suggests that an artist does not work in a vacuum but needs to be engaged in the socio-political realities of the world around him. Consequently, we can also conclude that Pahé's critical reflections on the socio-political realities of 20th and 21st century Africa and France, told in a graphic form and in the guise of his personal story/history, serve the higher purpose of effectuating social and political change.

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