

Studies in Comics
Volume 15 Numbers 1 & 2

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Received 2 December 2023; Accepted 26 July 2024; Published Online January 2025

DARNEL DEGAND
University of California, Davis

ANNIKA TYSON GRIER
University of California, Davis

‘WAIT! Isn’t cartooning supposed to be fun?!’: Little Barbara Brandon’s earliest lessons

Keywords

African American
Black
Brumsic Brandon, Jr.
Freedomways
Luther
MAD Magazine
Where I’m Coming From
women cartoonists

Abstract

This publication features a creative presentation of findings from interviews conducted with Barbara Brandon-Croft, the first African American woman to have a nationally syndicated newspaper comic strip in the United States, Where I’m Coming From (1989–2005). This article begins with an introduction to the historical contributions of women and Black American cartoonists. Afterward, it presents a detailed overview of (Barbara’s father) Brumsic Brandon, Jr.’s works as an activist, animator, cartoonist and television personality on numerous concurrent projects. Next, a similar review of Barbara Brandon-Croft’s accomplishments is offered. These results are part of a study that answers the following research questions: (1) how do stereotypes influence social interactions and communications amongst media industry

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professionals and stakeholders? (2) How have the social experiences, professional training and educational backgrounds of media industry professionals informed the choices they make in their specific roles within the media industry? The feature comic focuses on findings about Barbara's formative years and incorporates them into the narrative and illustrations. It serves as a preview of a graphic history book project that focuses on early moments in cartoonists' lives. This book will illustrate the backstories that changed each cartoonist's subjective world-view. It will reveal how these pivotal moments caused them to form beliefs that influence their reactions to stereotypes, their choice to tackle or avoid stereotypes and their decisions concerning how to use or portray stereotypes in their media projects.

Introduction

Newspaper comic strip series have been predominantly published by men ever since 1895 (Gabillet et al. 2013; Jones 2004; Robinson 2011). Yet, women have always contributed to this artform, even in its earliest years. Jerry Robinson, a comics historian and the co-creator of DC Comics' characters Joker and Robin (Kaplan 2006), explains: 'Three remarkable female artists [Rose O'Neill, Grace Drayton, and Nell Brinkley] were pioneer cartoonists at the turn of the twentieth century and made notable contributions to the cartoon arts' (Kaplan 2006: 137). Cartoonist and comics historian Trina Robbins elaborates further: 'A year after the official birth of comics, strips by Rose O'Neill were running in *Truth* [a weekly humor magazine]. So, women were already creating comics when the industry was one year old [i.e., 1896]' (n.d.: 2). Moreover, Grace Drayton began 'her foray into the comics pages with *Naughty Toodles* (1903), becoming the first woman cartoonist on the Hearst Syndicate' (Gomez 2016: 5). Of the three, Nell Brinkley had arguably the most success. She was regularly referred to as the 'Queen of Comics' throughout the 1910s–30s (Gomez 2016; Robbins n.d.). While describing the legacy of Brinkley's contributions to the industry, Comic Book Legal Defense Fund designer, editor and author Betsy Gomez writes:

[Brinkley's comics inspired] generations of young women and comics creators for years to come. [...] Brinkley spoke of the possibilities of freedom for women both on the editorial page and in society at large. Brinkley often found the opportunity to use her work to promote the roles of working women and the expansion of women's rights, including suffrage.

(2016: 2)

Yet Black cartoonists were shut out of the mainstream press throughout the earliest decades of the comic strip business. Today, George Herriman is recognized as a multiracial Black cartoonist and, therefore, possibly, the first Black cartoonist to have a nationally syndicated mainstream newspaper

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comic strip when his works began to be widely published in 1901 (Howard 2017). However, he kept his African lineage a secret from the public because he would not have enjoyed the same levels of success if he had been honest about his racial identity.

By no later than the 1920s, cartoonists who publicly identified as Black Americans were already publishing comic strips in Black-owned newspapers (Howard 2013). Leslie Roger’s *Bungleton Green* (1920–63) was one of the most successful and longest-running comics produced by independent Black cartoonists for African American outlets (Inge 1993; Jackson 2022). In 1932, Oliver Harrington entered the professional world of comics and produced a large portfolio of works, such as *Dark Laughter*, *Bootsie*, *Jive Gray* and many others, until he passed away in 1995 (Harrington 1958; Howard 2013; Inge 1993; Jones n.d.). Robinson praised Harrington in his in-depth historical review of US newspaper comic strips: ‘One of the greatest American cartoonists, Oliver Wendell “Ollie” Harrington, was also the most popular and influential black artist of his time’ (2011: 352). Moreover, the prolific African American author and activist Langston Hughes referred to Harrington as ‘Negro America’s favorite cartoonist’ (1958: n.pag.). Jackie Ormes was the first Black woman to have a nationally syndicated comic strip in a US newspaper in 1937 when her comic strip *Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem* (1937–38) was first published in the African American-owned *Pittsburgh Courier* (Goldstein 2019). Ormes continued publishing additional comics strip titles in Black-owned newspapers until she retired in 1956 (Goldstein 2019). In the late 1960s, the United States finally had three Black cartoonists with nationally syndicated comics in mainstream newspapers (Howard 2017). Morrie Turner was the first identifiably Black cartoonist with this opportunity in 1965 when he launched his comic *Wee Pals* (1965–2014). Brumsic Brandon, Jr (with *Luther* [1968–86]) and Ted Shearer (with *Quincy* [1970–86]) were the second and third Black cartoonists to have their comics nationally distributed in the mainstream market. Yet, despite these milestones for Black men, a Black woman would not have the same opportunity until Barbara Brandon-Croft’s comic *Where I’m Coming From* (1989–2005) began to be nationally distributed in mainstream newspapers in 1991 (Brandon 1993, 2023a; Degand 2024a). This is more than fifty years after Jackie Ormes’s *Torchy Brown* comic was first published.

Brumsic Brandon, Jr

Barbara Brandon-Croft’s father was Brumsic Brandon, Jr (1927–2014); the last page in a limited-edition reproduction of his *Some of My Best Friends* cartoon collection describes him as a ‘cartoonist, painter, sculptor, essayist, and civil rights activist’ (Brandon [1963] 2016: n.pag.). As explained above, Brumsic was also one of the first three Black cartoonists to have a nationally syndicated mainstream US newspaper comic strip (Howard 2017). His career as a cartoonist started in 1945 during his undergraduate years as a New York University art student (Brandon [1963] 2016:

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Howard 2017); he sold 'gag cartoons to national magazines such as *Mademoiselle* and *The Saturday Review of Literature*' (Howard 2017: 27). A decade later, after a stint in the US Army, which was later followed by 'work as an IBM machine operator, a statistical draftsman, and a technical illustrator' (Howard 2017: 27), Brumsic officially entered the media industry and would eventually juggle multiple simultaneous roles as an animator, cartoonist and television personality on numerous concurrent projects.

While employed as a fulltime animator at Bray Studios in Manhattan (1957–70), Brumsic also independently produced editorial cartoons during his off hours (Degand 2024a; Howard 2017). Decades later, while reflecting on his career, Brumsic explained: 'As a professional cartoonist since 1945, my occupational obligation has been to observe, interpret, and record. During the Civil Rights Movement, I marched, lettered placards, picketed, and also did my duty as a cartoonist' (Brandon [1963] 2016: n.pag.). His self-published series of 22 comics, *Some of My Best Friends* (Brandon [1963] 2016), is one early example of how his artistic talents were used in support of the Civil Rights Movement (see Figures 1–2).

In 1963, Brumsic's comics reached a larger audience when he became a regular contributor to the independent Black magazine *Freedomways: A Quarterly Review of the Freedom Movement* (Brandon 1963). He joined an impressive group of authors and artists that produced content for this publication between 1961 and 1985 (Jackson 2000; Turner 2009). A sampling of the many remarkable contributors to this magazine includes Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah (1966), Trinidadian Historian C. L. R. James (1964), African American Historian John Henrik Clarke (1961) and African American authors Alice Walker (1974) and Alex Haley (1979). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Chairman Julian Bond explains:

Contributors to *Freedomways* were distinguished by the high level of discourse they brought to their written work and also by their militant activism – these were writers with picket signs as well as pens in hand, scholars whose classrooms were the union halls, students who took instructions in the cotton fields or lunch counters, artists who brushed consciences as well as canvasses.

(2000: xvii–xviii)

Brumsic's comics appeared in *Freedomways* until its final issue (Brandon 1985). His works in *Freedomways* covered many topics, such as education (Brandon 1968), race relations between Black Americans and White Americans (Brandon 1963, 1966), politics (Brandon 1974, 1981) and similarities between the experiences of Indigenous peoples and Black Americans (Brandon 1969a). In 1970, Brumsic left his animation job at Bray Studios and joined the television cast of *Time for Joya* (1970–82) where he worked as an actor portraying an artist named Mr. B. B. (Brandon-Croft 2023a;

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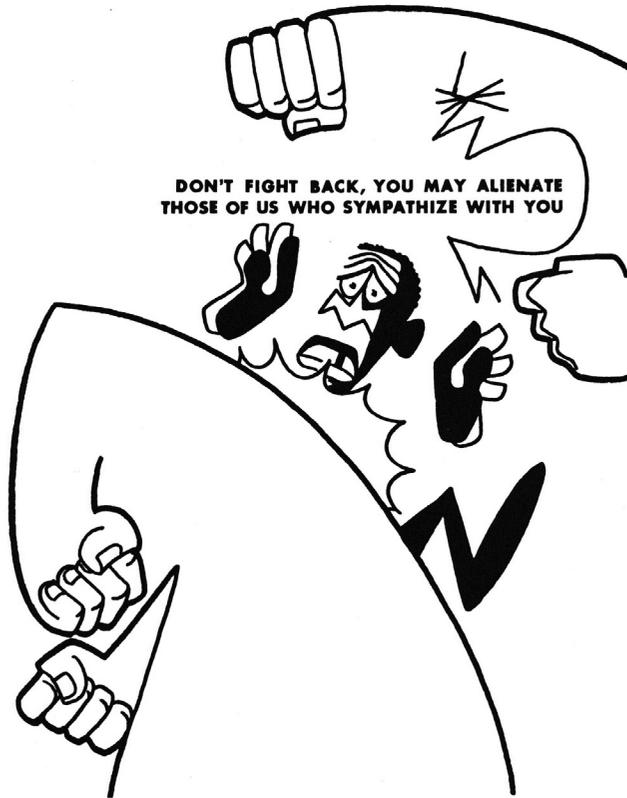


Figure 1: 1963 Some of My Best Friends comic 21/22 by Brumsic Brandon Jr ([1963] 2016). Courtesy of Barbara Brandon-Croft.



Figure 2: 1963 Some of My Best Friends comic 22/22 by Brumsic Brandon Jr ([1963] 2016). Courtesy of Barbara Brandon-Croft.

Sherrill 1970). He would also contribute his services to several other television shows throughout his career (Howard 2017). Comics scholar Sheena Howard (2017) explains that Brumscic also produced editorial cartoons for 'Black Media (also known as Black Resources), a consortium of Black newspapers, from 1974 until 1999' (2017: 30). Furthermore, Brumscic created a Monopoly styled boardgame titled 'Cullud: The Game That Tells It Like It Is' as another resource for tackling racism (Brandon 2023a).

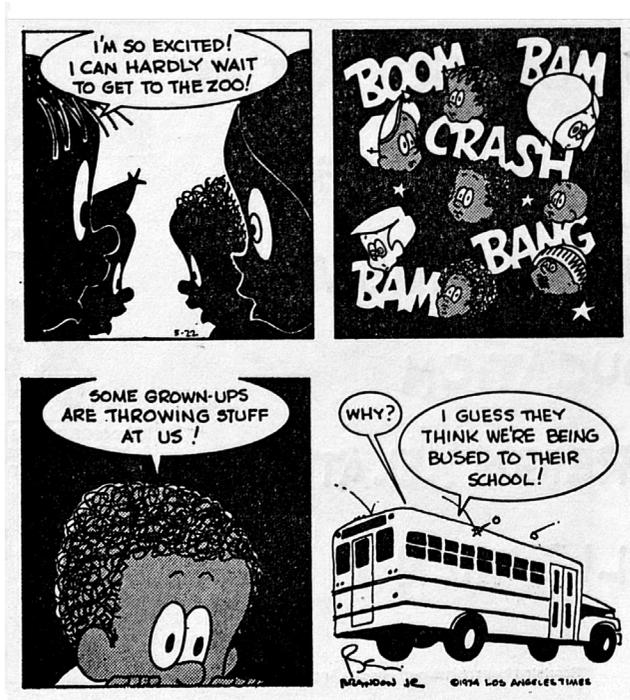


Figure 3: 22 May 1974 Luther comic by Brumscic Brandon Jr (1975). Courtesy of Barbara Brandon-Croft.



Figure 4: 3 September 1974 Luther comic by Brumscic Brandon Jr (1975). Courtesy of Barbara Brandon-Croft.

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Following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, Brumsic honoured the civil rights leader by creating a new comic, *Luther*, and naming its young protagonist after the recently slain hero (Howard 2017; Pendana n.d.). *Luther* became Brumsic's best-known contribution to the comics industry. As with other works in his portfolio, *Luther* offered him an additional means for expressing his views on racial inequities. However, in this instance, the injustices of racism were depicted through the experiences of young children (see Figures 3–4). Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to serve as a United States Representative, described the eponymous hero as 'a kind of "Everyman" for the millions of black school children who, since the epic Court decision in 1954, have been the subject of – and borne the brunt of – the slow painful process of [school integration]' (1976: n.pag.). *Luther* first appeared in the local Long Island newspaper *Newsday* in 1968 and was nationally syndicated by The Los Angeles Times Syndicate from 1970 to 1986 (Brandon [1963] 2016). The comics were collected into six books (Brandon 1969b, 1970, 1971a, 1971b, 1972, 1976).

Brumsic Brandon Jr's portfolio consists of more art than the examples discussed above. Several of his pieces are housed at the Library of Congress (n.d.). A more complete collection of his works can be found at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum (n.d.).

Barbara Brandon-Croft

Barbara Brandon-Croft's career in comics is directly inspired by her father's work as a cartoonist during her formative years (Degand 2024a). Barbara observed as Brumsic worked on multiple illustration projects in his dining room studio; yet she also inherited his need to speak out against injustices. In an interview with the first author, Barbara states, 'I credit growing up in my household for my ability to talk about these things with people that don't often find it easy to hear. It was very much a part of how I grew up' (cited in Degand 2024a: 459). Her comics often address difficult topics, such as racism, classism, sexism and politics (see Figures 5–6). However, Barbara's path into the comics industry required patience. In 1981, she was initially hired to produce a comics series for *Elan*, a newly formed magazine company with a Black female target audience:

I called it *Where I'm Coming From*. What it offered (then and now) was a window through which a large segment of society can take a closer look at a smaller segment of society and discover that, when you get right down to it, we're all pretty much the same. I liked it. My dad liked it. And better yet, the magazine liked it.

(Brandon-Croft 2023a: 20)

Sadly, *Elan* folded before any of Barbara's new comics had been printed in the magazine (Brandon-Croft 2023a). This false start left her disappointed, but Barbara was still determined to see her comics

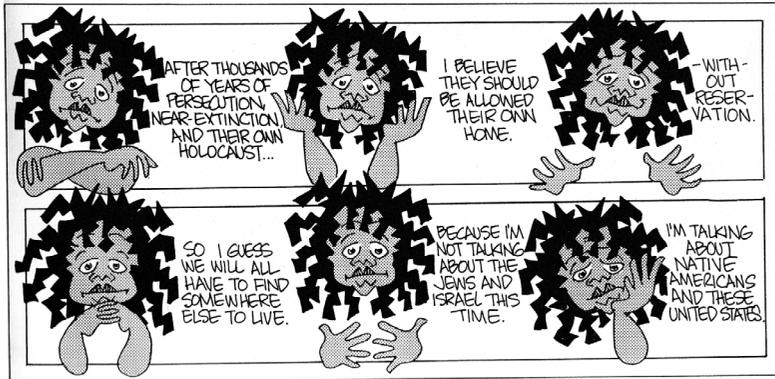


Figure 5: 1989 *Where I'm Coming From* comic by Barbara Brandon (2023a). Courtesy of Barbara Brandon-Croft.

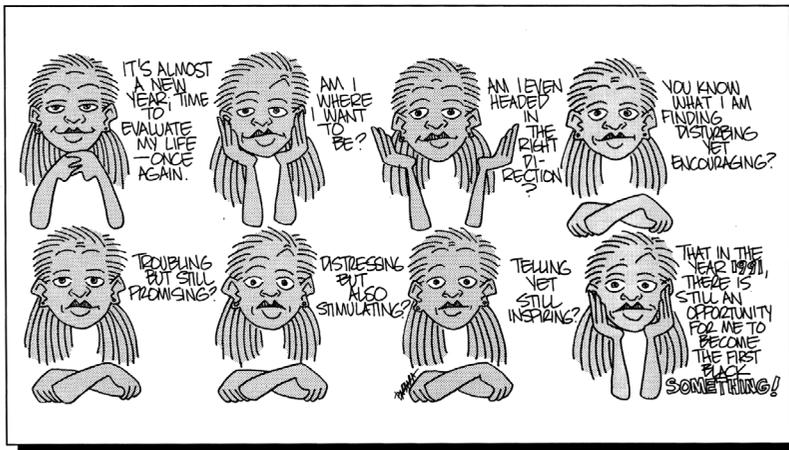


Figure 6: 1991 *Where I'm Coming From* comic by Barbara Brandon (2023a). Courtesy of Barbara Brandon-Croft.

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in print. She considered her initial target audience and decided to pitch *Where I'm Coming From* to *Essence* magazine (a popular magazine for Black female readers). It seemed like a logical new home for her comics. *Essence* was initially interested, but they eventually declined and hired her as a fashion and beauty writer instead. She accepted the fulltime position but continued working on the comic at home.

Barbara's big break finally arrived at the end of the decade. In 1988, *The Detroit Free Press* contacted Brumby about 'their ongoing search for Black cartoonists and their aim to have the funny pages better reflect their readership' (Brandon-Croft 2023a: 21). With some guidance from her dad, Barbara submitted her proposal to the newspaper, and they loved her ideas and unique illustrations. In her comprehensive book about Black women's contributions to comics culture (artist, poet and comics scholar) Deborah Whaley offers an excellent description of Brandon-Croft's comics design decisions:

In a visual space in which women's bodies often serve as exploitive signifiers, Brandon-Croft shifts the aesthetic in comics by presenting only the heads and hands of her characters. [...] She used thick sharp lines, pronounced yet varied ethnic features and hairstyles, and expressive, freely moving arms and hands. Her didactic dialogue appears under her talking heads without callout bubbles, and her characters voices discuss complicated cultural problems with pithy and vernacular inflected language.

(2016: 147–48)

Where I'm Coming From officially debuted to approximately 1.5 million subscribers on 11 June 1989 (Brandon-Croft 2023a; Whaley 2016). After finding success with the *Detroit Free Press*, Barbara set her sights on becoming nationally syndicated, just like her father. With newfound confidence, she sent proposals to many national distributors (Brandon-Croft 2023a). However, the possibility that she might see her comics in newspapers throughout the country began to appear less likely with each new rejection letter she received.

Yet, once again, Barbara found success when one company recognized her potential and agreed to work with her. She explains this in her recent book:

By 1990, Universal Press Syndicate offered me a development contract. Go on girl! I was on my way, and with a syndicate that clearly respected their artists. Not only did they not insist I change my approach (format or style) they encouraged me to do more of what I like doing most: writing more politically and socially stirring material. I couldn't ask for more. By 1991, I signed a full syndication deal!

(Brandon-Croft 2023a: 21)

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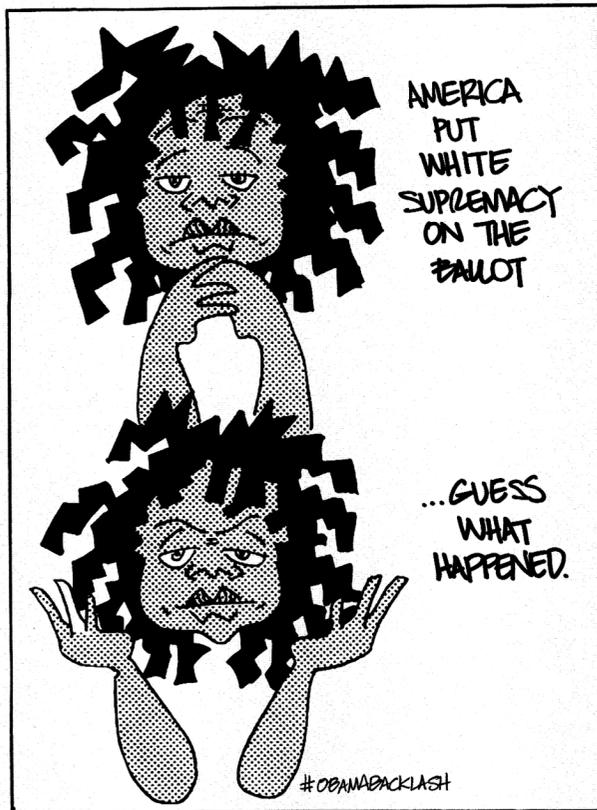


Figure 7: 2017 *Where I'm Coming From* comic by Barbara Brandon (2023a). Courtesy of Barbara Brandon-Croft.

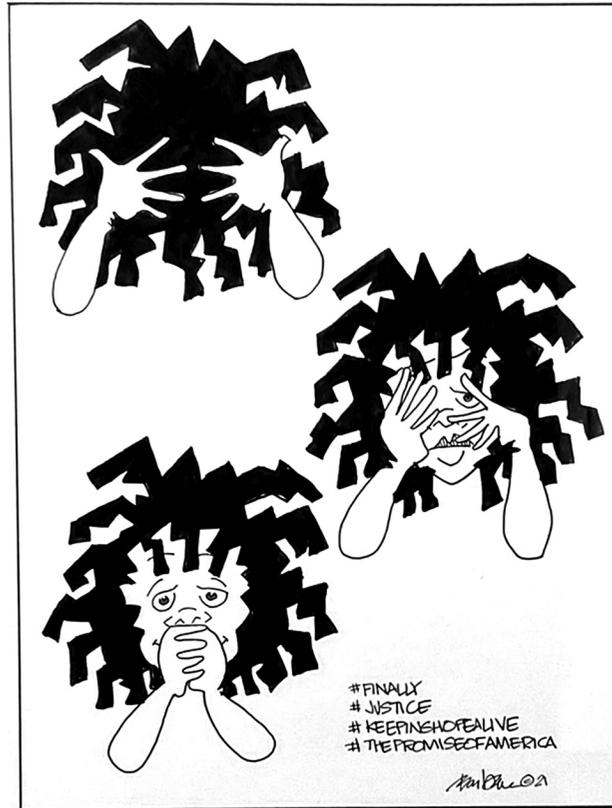


Figure 8: 2021 *Where I'm Coming From* comic (Brandon-Croft 2021). Courtesy of Barbara Brandon-Croft.

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In addition to now having a newspaper comic strip in more than one hundred US cities, *Where I'm Coming From* also reached 'across the diaspora by appearing in Jamaican and South African publications as well' (Bullock 2016: 57). Barbara's portfolio grew to include illustration credits in other books (Ahmed-Cawthorne 1996; Dejongh and Cato-Louis 1997) and *MAD* magazine (Brandon 1994). After her syndication run ended in 2005, she stopped working as a professional cartoonist for more than a decade.

With her comics career slowing down, Barbara joined *Parents* magazine as a research editor; however, the 2016 US election results eventually stirred her dormant inner cartoonist (Brandon-Croft 2023a). With support from a new creative partner, curator Tara Nakashima Donahue, Barbara began posting new comics online (see Figure 7). Eventually, a comic that she posted in reaction to US police officer Derrick Chauvin's guilty verdict for the murder of US civilian George Floyd was recognized and featured in the *Washington Post* (Brandon 2021a, 2021b; Cavna 2021) (see Figure 8).

Despite all her accomplishments, Barbara's achievements and milestones had not been properly recognized and celebrated prior to her return in 2016. Scholars had raised this concern and shared how *Where I'm Coming From* paved the way for later works, such as Aaron McGruder's nationally syndicated politically charged comic *The Boondocks* (1996–2006) (Bullock 2016; Whaley 2016). But since her return, Barbara has been busy. While she continues to share new comics on social media, she has also produced comics for Women in Comics Collective's *WinC Magazine* (Brandon-Croft 2022a), collected her comics into an Eisner Award-nominated book collection (Brandon-Croft 2023a; SDCC 2024) and published her mini-memoir in the Museum of Modern Art's online e-zine *Magazine* (Brandon-Croft 2023b). She recently received a Comic-Con International's Inkpot Award at the 2024 San Diego Comic Convention (San Diego Comic Convention 2024). Moreover, Barbara recently travelled to Lagos, Nigeria and collaborated with veteran Nigerian cartoonist Wale Adenuga: 'Through workshops, panel discussions, and interactive sessions, Brandon-Croft exchanged views with Nigeria's prominent and emerging cartoonists, journalists, comic artists, illustrators, caricaturists, animators, students, journalism, and arts professors' (U.S. Mission Nigeria 2024: n.pag.).

Introducing the comic essay

The comic presented on the following pages is informed by interviews the first author conducted with Barbara Brandon-Croft as part of a larger research study of stereotypes and media production experiences. The specific research questions that guide these investigations are: (1) how do stereotypes influence social interactions and communications amongst media industry professionals and stakeholders? (2) How have the social experiences, professional training and educational backgrounds of media industry professionals informed the choices they make in their specific roles within the media industry? There are over one hundred participants in this study. My examinations

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of their experiences, portfolios and products are guided by a qualitative phenomenological approach (Degand forthcoming 2025; Käufer et al. 2021). Phenomenology is an interpretivist methodology that acknowledges the existence of multiple truths. It recognizes how different individuals who experience the same phenomenon can legitimately have differing interpretations, form varying meanings, and share divergent accounts of that same phenomenon. The phenomenological approach is necessary for my research investigations because I am interested in my participants' subjective perspectives and the personal meanings they derive from their social interactions. I collected data through interviews, visits to media production sites and content analyses of artists' portfolios and projects. This study was approved by the University of California, Davis's Institutional Review Board.

I recruited participants through in-person networking (e.g. educational art programme events, artists' studio tours, media lab presentations, museum exhibitions, art festivals and media conferences). I also engaged in online networking to connect with potential interviewees through direct messages on social media platforms. Primary examples are the month-long social media art challenges I participated in. This includes comic illustrator Aaron Beatty's *#Heruary* Black History Month daily art prompts; each day in February is dedicated to learning about and illustrating one independently produced Black superhero (Beatty 2020, 2024; Hillesheim 2021). I also participated in cartoonist Harold George's *#JuneToon* art challenge (n.d.; 2024). This month-long challenge encourages illustrators to share a daily drawing of their favourite childhood cartoon characters.

Prior to recruiting Barbara Brandon-Croft for this study, I first learned of her while reviewing past literature about the history of the comics industry. She briefly appears in some texts that offer a broad overview of the comics medium (e.g. Walker 2002). However, she receives more attention in publications that focus on Black comic producers and women in the comics industry (Brunet and Davis 2022; Bullock 2016; Gomez 2016; Howard 2017; Robbins 2013; Whaley 2016). When I learned that she was active in social media, I contacted her through Instagram direct messaging and invited her to participate in this study. As with other research participants in this study (e.g. Degand 2020, 2022a, 2024b), the interviews I conducted with Barbara revealed important details about her upbringing, educational background, media consumption habits and media production experiences. Moreover, my analyses of Barbara's comics portfolio offered me concrete examples of her design choices, illustration techniques and storytelling approaches. My analyses revealed important insights into how the media she produces are influenced by her upbringing, her apprenticeship training under her father, her educational background and her personal interactions. The data reveals numerous examples of biased and prejudiced interactions she has experienced at various stages of her life as a Black girl, Black woman and Black female professional cartoonist. Furthermore, there are multiple examples of how Barbara consciously addresses stereotypes in her works. Much of her approach is influenced by her father's work and her fond memories of the publications that inspired her when she was growing up in her New Cassel, Long Island home (e.g. *Freedomways*, *MAD* and *Muhammad Speaks*).

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This visual essay is a creative presentation that focuses on my findings about Barbara's formative years. My co-author, Annika Grier, and I incorporate numerous details into the illustrations. For example, on page two, the publications on the kitchen table are magazines and newspapers that Barbara discussed during our interviews. Her family had a subscription to *Muhammad Speaks*, the Nation of Islam's first nationwide newspaper (Hussain 2021; Pendana n.d.). Her uncle, Waliakbar Muhammad (formerly known as Emerson Brandon), was one of the publication's photographers (Allah and Allah 2016). Annika also illustrates pages from *Freedomways* into this scene; Barbara and her siblings saw their father's contributions to this magazine from 1963 to 1985. Furthermore, the local newspaper that *Luther* debuted in, *Newsday*, is also included in this scene.

Our portrayal of Barbara's confusion concerning her father's seriousness and his profession as a cartoonist is drawn directly from sentiments she shared with me during an interview: 'In '69, when I was like 11 or 12, I can remember feeling: "How come we have to be quiet when he's supposed to be a cartoonist!? He's supposed to be fun!"' (cited in Degand 2024a: 454). The opening scene between Barbara and her brother, Brumsic III, is inspired by Barbara's comments in a past interview with creative fiction author and *The Trove* e-zine founder Sharon Pendana: 'We [Barbara and her best friend] were tomboys, two peas in a pod, and wanted to play football with the boys' (n.d.: n.pag.). She is illustrated holding an issue of *MAD* and singing along while watching *Sound of Music* (Wise 1965) with her siblings because *MAD* was her favourite magazine. Barbara explained: '*MAD* used to do these little spoofs of [...] movies or television shows, and they did the *Sound of Music*. And sometimes I'll sing the lines that they had in *MAD* magazine instead of the [movie's original song lyrics]' (2022b: n.pag.). Lastly, the drawing test that Brumsic gave his children is also derived from details Barbara shared during an interview:

[My dad] had a daily [comic strip], except for Sundays. So, he had six strips per week. Every other week he had to do 12 strips. He had done all the other stuff, but he didn't do the lettering. I did that. And for years ... I often put the Zip-A-Tone on. I guess he would feel like, 'Oh, this is all done, except for that final stage'. [But before getting these opportunities, my dad gave] me and my siblings a test to see who might be able to do it and I did best. My brother had a wobbly hand. I think my sister was like: 'I don't want to do this'. She was the oldest. She wasn't participating.

[...] And that's how I got that gig. So, I did that. And sometimes inking in shadows. And I certainly didn't know I was being trained as a cartoonist all that time.

(cited in Degand 2024a: 456)

This work is done in the spirit of the *Golden Legacy* series, in which the lives of important historical black figures are delivered through the comic book medium (Degand 2022b). *Golden Legacy*

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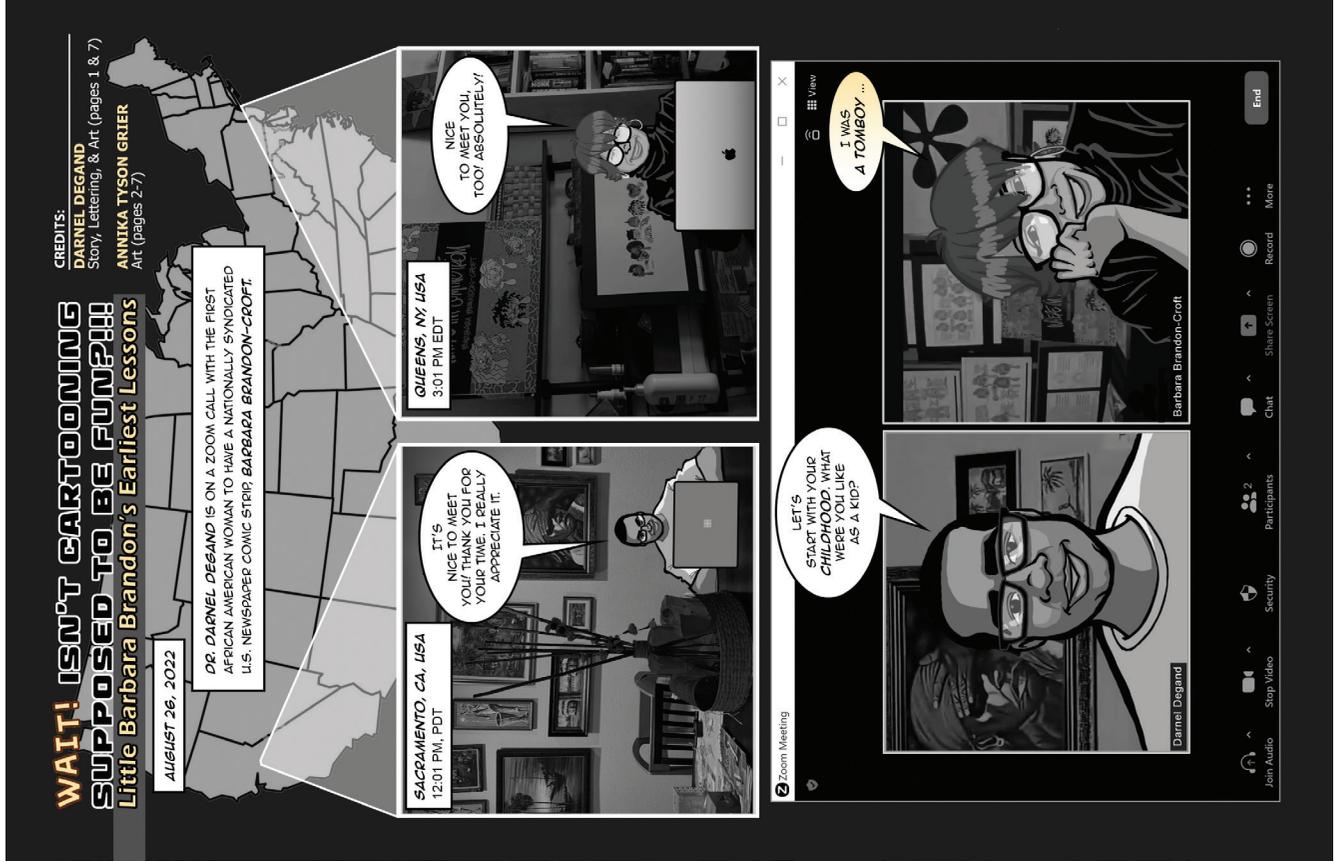
is a collection of sixteen comic books that were published between 1966 and 1976. They feature illustrated biographies of famous individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr, Harriet Tubman and Toussaint L'Ouverture. Fitzgerald Publishing, the company that sells these titles, has sold over 25 million copies of these books and they are still available for purchase today (Fitzgerald Publishing Company n.d.). The former owner of the company, the late Bertram Fitzgerald (1932–2017), received a GLYPH comics Pioneer award in 2005 for his contributions to the comics industry, African American media and education (Degand 2022b; ECBACC 2020a, 2020b). We hope you enjoy this preview of a graphic history book project that will focus on the early lives of Barbara Brandon-Croft and several other cartoonists. This book will illustrate the backstories that moulded each cartoonist's subjective world-view. It will reveal numerous pivotal moments in their early lives that caused them to form the beliefs that influence their reactions to stereotypes, their choice to tackle or avoid stereotypes and their decisions concerning how to use or portray stereotypes in their media projects.

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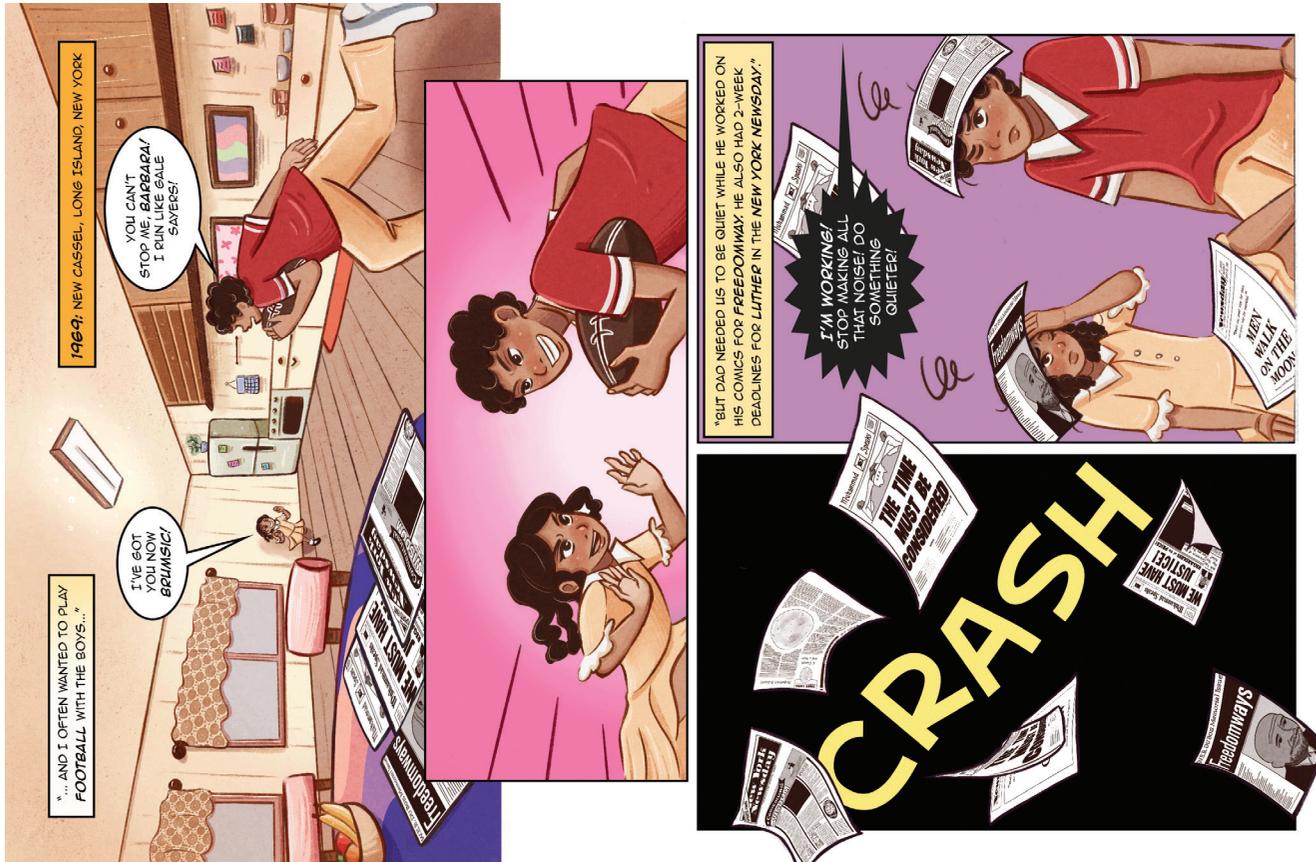


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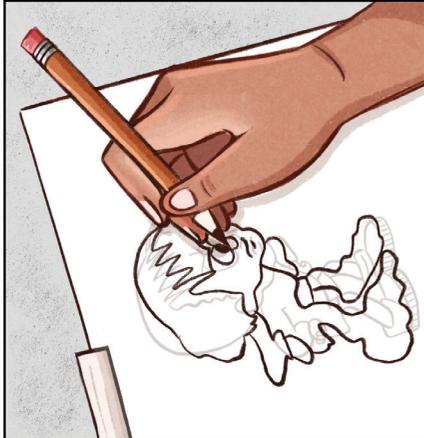
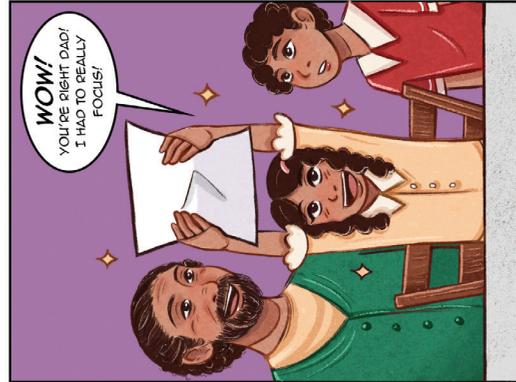
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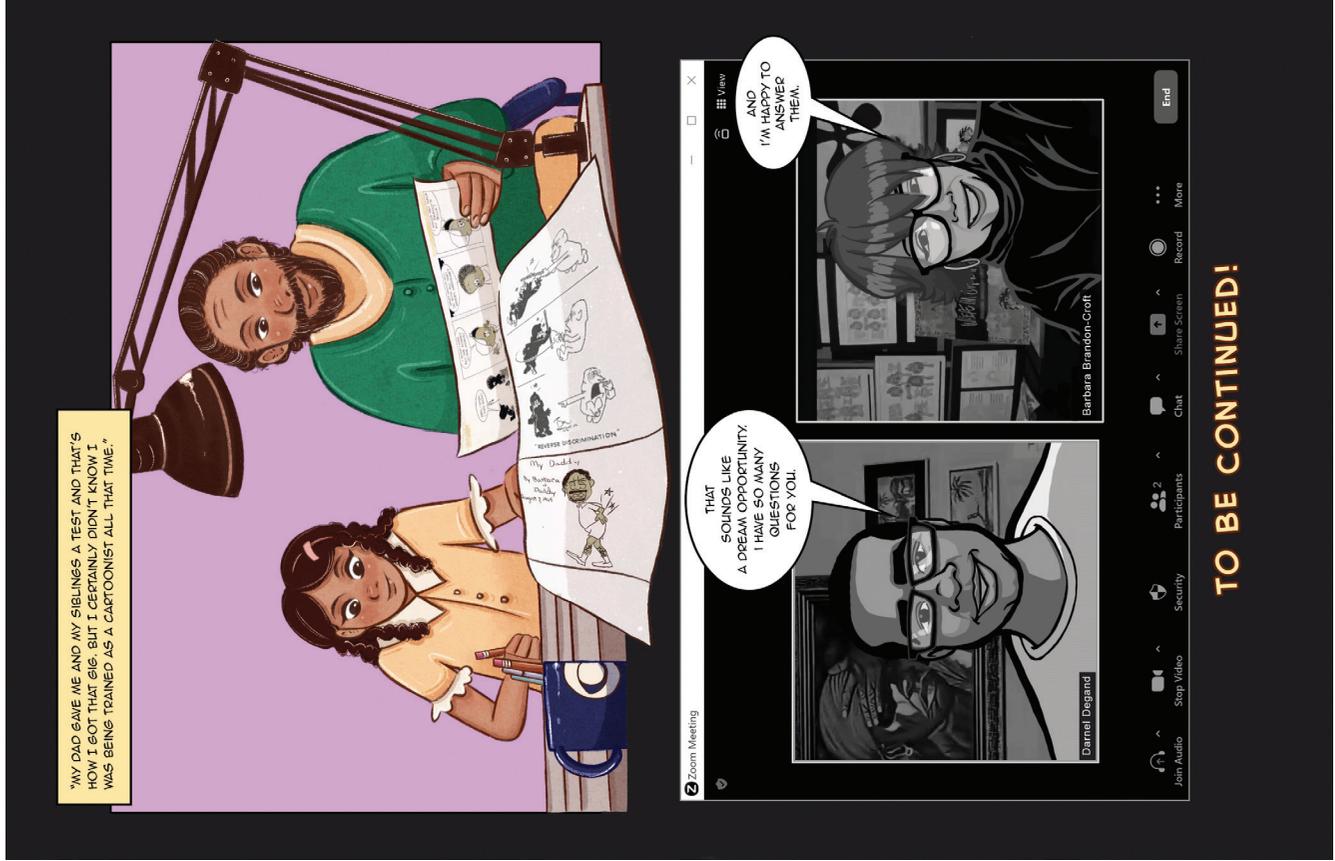
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Suggested citation

Degand, Darnel and Grier, Annika Tyson (2024), "'WAIT! Isn't cartooning supposed to be fun?!': Little Barbara Brandon's earliest lessons', *Studies in Comics*, Special Issue: 'Comics, Conscience and Gender', 15:1&2, pp. 119–45, https://doi.org/10.1386/stic_00121_1

Contributor details

Darnel Degand is an assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis (UC Davis). His research explores social processes in media production environments and media consumption experiences. He also designs and develops educational media products and experiences. He received his Ed.D. in instructional technology and media from Teachers College, Columbia University, an MS in digital imaging and design from New York University and a BSE in mechanical engineering and applied mechanics from the University of Pennsylvania. A sampling of his professional experiences before joining UC Davis include roles as a game designer/developer for Sesame Workshop, as a technical development manager for an online advertising company acquired by Amazon, and as a multimedia designer for the City University of New York. He has published articles in the *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, *Journal of Futures Studies*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *Multimodality & Society*, *Studies in Comics*, *The Comics Grid*, *The Qualitative Report* and *Theory into Practice*. Darnel was also a plenary speaker at the *California Association of*

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Contact: University of California, Davis, 1 Shields Ave, Davis, CA 95616, USA.
E-mail: ddegand@ucdavis.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3480-4192>

Annika Tyson Grier is an alumnus of the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), with a Bachelor of Arts in Design. At UC Davis, she worked on genres such as storyboarding, comics, illustration and graphic design. Annika also obtained a minor in education from UC Davis, reflecting her commitment to learning and teaching, as she actively shared her artistic knowledge with students from multiple grade levels. Her diverse experiences highlight her creative and leadership abilities. A sampling of her experiences includes roles such as a storyboard and comic artist for UC Davis Professor Darnel Degand, layout director for UC Davis' *Open Ceilings Magazine*, and a counselor for UC Davis' Youth Program Art Camp. After graduating, Annika is now an academic support specialist at Oakland Unified School District and works on illustration, storyboarding and comic projects.

Contact: University of California, Davis, 1 Shields Ave, Davis, CA 95616, USA.
E-mail: annika.grier21@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5318-4696>

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