
The Legacy of Shindana Toys: Black Play and Black Power

An Interview with David Crittendon, Yolanda Hester, and Rob Goldberg

David Crittendon is an educator, musician, activist, historian, and the author of the novel *Then See If I Care: A Story about Bessie Smith*. In 1964, he participated with Lou Smith and others in the Mississippi Freedom Summer and, in 1965, worked alongside Smith at the Congress of Racial Equality's Harlem office. He cofacilitated the Claiming Freedom Symposium commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Freedom Summer at Cal State-LA. Yolanda Hester is a historian, archivist, educator, and writer. She curated the online exhibit *Community and Commerce: Oral Histories of African Businesses in Los Angeles* for The Center for Oral History Research. She has written about the history of Black dolls and is currently working on an oral history series with The Arthur Ashe Legacy Fund at UCLA. Crittendon and Hester both served as historical consultants for *Shindana Toy Company: Changing the American Doll Industry*, a special 2019 episode of PBS affiliate KCET's program *Lost L.A.* Rob Goldberg teaches history and cinema studies at Saint Ann's School in Brooklyn. His current book project, under contract at Duke University Press, looks at the way social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s changed how Americans think and talk about toys. In 2019 Crittendon, Hester, and Goldberg founded the Operation Bootstrap History Collaborative. **Key words:** African American; Baby Nancy; Black joy; Black Power; dolls; Lou Smith; Marva Maxie; Operation Bootstrap; Robert Hall; Shindana Toys; Watts

American Journal of Play: You have elsewhere emphasized that the story of Shindana Toys and its breakout doll, Baby Nancy—introduced in 1968—is intertwined with the civil rights movement. What does the history of the company tell us about Black activism and the Black community?

Yolanda Hester: A great deal can be learned from the story of Shindana, its parent company Operation Bootstrap, and the activists involved, about Black activism, and the Black community. For context, the whole affair—both Shindana and Operation Bootstrap—was started by two activists:

Lou Smith and Robert Hall. Smith and Hall had been involved in fighting for civil rights for quite some time before they launched Bootstrap. Both were members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Hall was a local activist who also helped start N-VAC (Non-Violent Action Committee) in Los Angeles. Smith had been an activist in the east—in Philadelphia, New York, and New Jersey—as well as in Mississippi, where he participated in the 1964 Freedom Summer voting registration drives.

David Crittendon: I met Marva Maxey and Lou Smith in Freedom Summer in Mississippi. We quickly became fast friends. Their Philadelphia sophistication and political acumen was far beyond mine, and I quickly realized I should tag along and learn something. Mississippi was white hot with resistance to “outside agitators,” “n— lovers,” and anything to do with changing the South’s “way of life.” Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizers had entered Mississippi more than two years before activist Bob Moses sent out the call to elite colleges to come South and join the crusade for a more equal America. Activists Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman were already deceased when I met Lou and Marva at the CORE convention in Kansas City, Missouri. The curtain dropped real fast when so many of us decided to not take the invitation to return home to the safety of our families. Though I was a weak link, early the following morning, Lou invited me to ride with him and others to the burned church in Longdale, Mississippi, where the trio was last seen. After a brief whispered moment in this rural haunted pine grove, it was time to go. We quickly attracted visitors, meaning the local Ku Klux Klan, who chased us through the woods to a small village. We took a breather then returned back toward Neshoba County, and damn if we didn’t get chased again. This time longer, faster, and more frightening. Lou’s sense of gallows humor and determined survivorship helped us remain almost calm. I remember his looking about, assessing, measuring risk against the benefits of making a difference in a lawless South. It’s not that Lou Smith was not frightened; anything could go down. He taught that there were no rules, except to mask the fear, accept fate, learn from your mentors, always show gratitude to the Black community that risked their homes and lives for strangers and demonstrated daily what a beautiful culture looked like.

Lou Smith was a polished advocate with a lot of street smarts as well as political savvy. Robert Hall was an impassioned street organizer, impatient with the status quo in South Central Los Angeles. It became clear that Hall

and Smith were peers, ready to create some “good trouble” if need be.

YH: In 1965 Smith was sent to LA [Los Angeles] by CORE to serve as the western regional director. Not too long after Smith arrived, the Watts Uprising erupted. This was in August 1965. Hall and Smith had met earlier at CORE meetings. After the uprising, they wanted to do something, wanted to respond to what was happening. Hall had already branched out from CORE to help found N-VAC with a goal of being more grassroots and on the ground with the community. With the spirit of that in mind, they joined forces to establish Operation Bootstrap, a community-based organization that offered a number of needed services to the community. A couple years later, they would embark on creating a toy company, Shindana Toys. They embedded their social justice philosophies and methods into the work they did. They were very connected to the local community, and the community was very involved, weighing in on decisions or working at the organizations. Both Smith and Hall were keenly aware of all of the different strands of the Black freedom movement expressed at the time: the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, Black Arts Movement, the Black Panthers, the student protest movement, and even Black Capitalism, and some of these ideas were incorporated into the work that they did.

What’s particularly remarkable about their work—and work that was deeply socioeconomic, political in purpose—was the relationships that they established in the community and the authenticity that they fought for. And this authenticity can be found, of course, in the craftsmanship of the dolls but also in the way in which both organizations evolved.

Rob Goldberg: I’d add that the Operation Bootstrap story, of which Shindana is just one part, reminds us of the diversity of Black Power activism during the late 1960s and 1970s. It also reminds us that business was understood as a key tool for producing social change, just as it had been for generations of African American reformers before. The history of Operation Bootstrap and Shindana complicates the conventional story of the postwar civil rights movement. In that narrative, once Martin Luther King, Jr.’s quest for national legislation had been achieved in 1964 and 1965, the Black freedom movement suddenly collapsed, or imploded. But that wasn’t the case! Ironically, this familiar declension narrative often points to the insurrection in Watts as the beginning of the end of the movement, when, arguably, Watts is not the end of Black civic activism but a turning point, a moment when Black Americans in Los Angeles came to see how little the state was willing

to do to redress centuries of inequity and discrimination and violence and how they needed to do it themselves. Operation Bootstrap was born out of that realization. So were many other organizations, like the Studio Watts Workshop and the Watts Writers Project and the LA Black Arts Movement led by Betye Saar and David Hammons, which historian Kellie Jones has documented in her 2017 book *South of Pico*. All of this came after Watts and out of the movement for Black Power. In that sense, Baby Nancy and the company's other dolls are the products of Black Power too.

AJP: In interviews, Shindana Toys cofounder Lou Smith often described the company's products as educational tools: building up self-love and pride in Black children as well as potentially cultivating empathy and antiracist attitudes in other children. Why did the company imagine playthings could have this impact?

YH: There is a long tradition of toys being used as educational tools, whether to teach kids the social norms or to develop skills. But toys, like children's literature, have also been employed to inculcate racist ideas and white supremacy, sometimes overtly and at other times less so. It makes me think of the pickaninny dolls and also the lack of representation in literature. Regardless of intent, the impact remains effective, and over the years, African Americans have produced toys not only to fill the gap in what has been available for Black children but also to counter and challenge some of these ideas. Toys geared to Black children to bolster self-esteem or instill racial pride have a long history. Marcus Garvey produced dolls for this purpose, as did Richard Henry Boyd and Sara Lee Creech. W. E. B. Du Bois even published the *Brownies' Book* as well, the first children's magazine geared toward Black kids. Probably the most significant historical moment in thinking about the self-esteem of Black kids and toys would be the doll tests conducted in the 1940s by doctors Mamie and Kenneth Clark, psychologists who through their tests drew conclusions about the impact of racism on the self-esteem of Black children. Smith and Hall were undoubtedly aware of these tests, but they also knew that the most consequential impact would lie in ensuring that the toys expressed a level of undeniable authenticity.

And, of course, ideas of representation and authenticity are relative to the times. This is where I think the work and conversations generated by the artists of the Black Arts Movement had influence. Artist Jim Toatley sculpted the Baby Nancy mold which was molded after a local girl, local

artists designed the clothes influenced by a palette of Pan-Africanism, and the use of Swahili was present and forefront. All of these factors expressed a level of community involvement and political insight that made people proud to have these dolls. In my interviews of people connected to the organization, there was tremendous pride in not only the products that Shindana produced but also in the work that was being done by the organizations in supporting the community.

DC: Within the Black community, there is always the desire to move up higher, do a little better than anybody expected under the circumstances. Yolanda, thank you for naming Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Clarks as exemplars of the desire to do better by the Black community. Each generation striving harder and deeper for the location where the family might thrive at least part of the time. I remember my maternal grandfather, David Hawkins, “recollecting” that a friend had been in Detroit in the 1930s and heard a Black preacher say, “God is Black.” It was the most confounding statement he had yet heard. “Well, ain’t this something. God is Black.” That followed a discussion with my grandmother, Susie, arguing that nobody knows the color of God or if God can or will be seen. There is humor here but the imagery lasts. That, if God is Black, then color of skin must be beyond caste. The white standard no longer exists, but yet a Black God is not promoted as a doll or toy unless we discuss the spirit masks out of African antiquity. All this to say, there is great pride in dolls that build the child’s imagination. There is great benefit in every culture’s sense of beauty and identity. Lou Smith and Marva early on saw the value in promoting the idea of authenticity within the Black community. This represents the depth of their own learning and willingness to nurture self-love.

AJP: Shindana Toys was founded in the heart of the Los Angeles community of Watts. What can you tell us about the relationship between Black joy and play in Watts?

YH: Well, Black joy exists and Black joy matters. It has always existed. But I also think of Tamir Rice, and the nine-year-old girl who was peppered sprayed in Rochester, New York, and fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, and George Stinney, who was fourteen when he was executed, and more recently sixteen-year-old Ma’Khia Bryant, and the type of racialized violence imposed on Black kids. And yet Black joy and Black play still exist. It still emerges. It still thrives. And you can see that across many communities.

RG: I agree. The problem is that for centuries it has been silenced, neglected, and

undocumented by those who have controlled the production of history. This muting of Black joy reflected a larger racist cultural project, because to express joy and happiness and laughter in a society that denigrates and dehumanizes you is to refuse dehumanization. It's an act of resistance to the logic of white supremacy, an affirmation of being alive. And as Yolanda said, those affirmations could be found across the country in the 1960s and 1970s, including in Watts. In fact, during the same years that Watts became associated almost exclusively with Black anguish and rioting, the real community of Watts became a center of Black artistic and cultural production. And joy was central. Poet Jayne Cortez founded the Watts Repertory Theater Company, and it flourished. In 1972 the Wattstax Festival made history with its sonic expressions of Black pride. We can find further evidence of Black joy in Watts if we open our source base to the artifacts of cinema and television. I'm thinking of the neighborhood kids at play in Charles Burnett's landmark 1978 film, *Killer of Sheep*. And let's not forget that Watts was the setting for comedian Redd Foxx's own iconoclastic vision of Black joy in his top-rated NBC sitcom, *Sanford and Son*. It's no coincidence that Shindana Toys produced the first and only Redd Foxx talking doll. We might say that the company brought Black joy to toys in the same way Foxx brought it to TV.

DC: My shout-out goes to Peter J. Harris, poet, griot, songster, brother, friend, mentor, who founded the Black Man of Happiness Project in 2010 (blackmanofhappiness.com). Long before happiness was formalized, Peter was happy. Determined despite the cost or set back to see himself and his own humanity brought front and center. Happiness, the smile, the camaraderie of brothers in pairs, in groups, laughing without time to stop laughing, modeling the possibility of the free Black man alive with joy, maintaining the bright light within that holds the key to Birdsong. See you, Peter J. See you laughing every day. See you.

AJP: What was the industrial design, sculpting, and manufacturing process like for producing Black dolls and figures in the 1960s and 1970s?

RG: What it looked like in the 1960s was very different from what it looked like in the 1970s, generally speaking. Up until the late 1960s, the large toy makers that did produce Black dolls did little more than tint the resin of the plastic before adding it to the mold, in order to color it brown. That changed at the 1968 Toy Fair, when Mattel and Remco both introduced what they later called "ethnically correct" Black dolls—dolls with distinc-

tive head molds meant to represent Black features, as opposed just to the white dolls tinted brown. Later that same year, with the financial assistance and expert advice of Mattel (which had its headquarters in Los Angeles), Operation Bootstrap launched Shindana, which brought out its own ethnically correct doll, Baby Nancy. But Smith and Hall didn't stop there. In 1969 the company achieved a new level of intentionality and authenticity when it decided that the Nancy doll, which originally had rooted straight hair in pigtails, deserved a second version that celebrated the Afro hairstyle that had become increasingly popular and politically meaningful. It wasn't easy. They ended up importing a specially made oven from Italy that could simulate the natural hair texture of many Black people. Baby Nancy had the first natural in toy history.

YH: Yes, and even in the late 1960s early 1970s, it was still hard to pull off what Shindana did without full control over manufacturing. Although successful, they ended up manufacturing their own dolls. During the first year, when they outsourced some of the production, they had issues with manufacturers defaulting to traditional molds and "correcting" features on the Baby Nancy doll.

AJP: Shindana Toys sought to capture the rich diversity of the Black community in small details such as hair texture, textile patterns for clothes, and character backstories like those for Career Girl Wanda. Tell us more about the creative process and where the company found its models and inspirations.

RG: Shindana found its models and inspiration quite literally in the community where Operation Bootstrap was born. The toy makers who developed the design for Baby Nancy's head mold were highly conscious of the need to make her facial features distinctively Black. But it was more than that: They wanted to create a representation of a young Black child that not only looked nonstereotyped but also reflected how Black children saw themselves. And so, before they even made their in-house drawings to cut the mold, they invited local Watts kids to submit their drawings and used them as inspiration. The result was that Shindana represented Black children in ways no other Black dolls had. The company's designers also invoked aspects of the contemporary Black experience that were missing entirely from children's consumer culture. For instance, all of the Li'l Souls rag dolls came with a narrative-based coloring book that centers on the lives of two of the Li'l Souls, Sis and Wilkie, as they move from Alabama to live with their grandmother. In doing so, the book placed these characters

in an important cultural narrative of migration that defined the African American experience of the twentieth century, when six-and-a-half-million people fled the south for better lives and transformed cities like Philadelphia, Cleveland, Chicago, and of course, Los Angeles.

YH: They eventually expanded beyond baby dolls into Barbie-like dolls in 1972. Their Career Girl line highlighted careers that they thought were feasible and inspiring for young Black girls. Each doll came with a character book. Each doll was modeled after real women and real women from the community who held those jobs. They really drew on their community as their greatest resource.

AJP: As the company grew, what kinds of challenges did Shindana Toys face?

YH: What we know from some documentation is that distribution proved to be challenging at times. There was a newspaper article where a Shindana executive talked about the fact that toy distributors wanted to distribute the dolls solely in Black communities and not white communities, despite white families making up a significant customer base for the company. The distributors just didn't believe that that was true, and yet to compete Shindana needed to tap into that market as well, so company executives had to constantly prove to the distributors that that was a viable market for their toys. Additionally, when the dolls were distributed to the Black market, there were never enough, as store owners, feeling that they only served a niche market, would buy only a small quantity.

RG: Another issue for Shindana in particular was a shifting commercial landscape. All of the large corporate toy companies, the ones who could afford to advertise on TV, had economies of scale that Shindana could never match. When buyers for variety stores in the 1970s wanted, say, a case of Kenner's TV-advertised white doll, they could purchase a smaller number of Kenner's brown-colored Black versions of that doll at a cost much lower than what Shindana could offer for its ethnically correct Black dolls. Culturally, Shindana's timing was great. Commercially, much less so. This was the moment that huge food corporations like Nabisco and General Mills were buying up toy companies. This concentration of the toy business proved to be a major obstacle. Mattel had done so much to help Shindana get off the ground, but by the end of the 1970s, it was mainly a competitor with exponentially larger resources.

DC: I lost contact with Lou and Marva as I invested in my music quest during the late 1960s into the 1970s. We would occasionally catch up on the phone

and promise to get together. It was always wonderful to renew the bond and friendship. Unfortunately, time slipped away from us.

I remember a visit with Lou and Robert Hall at Operation Bootstrap. I can't name the date. Robert did not appear well. He was not his usual self. I sensed his separation from the ideals and brilliant efforts of the Bootstrap years. Robert was an organizer to the bone. Running a company that manufactured dolls was far from his calling. I know Lou and Robert did their best to salvage what remained of their partnership. Like many 1960s activists, Robert was down for action, for ideas that continued and validated his abilities. It must have been painful for Robert to understand that Lou believed building Shindana would prove more substantial and beneficial to the South Central Los Angeles community than the former Bootstrap model. Great respect to Robert Hall and Lou Smith and Marva Maxey. Their accomplishment and sacrifice is full of love and valor.

AJP: For many children, Shindana Toys offered the earliest formative examples of Black dolls and toys that existed. In your own childhoods, do you recall seeing Black representation on the toy shelves or on the playground?

YH: My early childhood was spent in Chicago in the 1970s before my family moved to Maryland. We lived on the south side of Chicago in a predominantly Black neighborhood. When I think of my childhood during those times, I think of *The Jackson Five Show*, my aunt showing off her afro, dancing to *Soul Train*, and playing softball with cousins. I remember a lot of experiences and a lot of play, but not a lot of toys. I do remember one doll that I was very attached to. She was a Black doll, and I have no idea where my parents got her as Black dolls were hard to come by at that time. I loved this doll so much and took her everywhere with me. One day we went to the beach and while playing in the water a little girl came by and stole her. I cried for days. It was my first experience of loss. My parents tried to replace her, but I wouldn't accept a new doll. I remember being quite upset for some time then losing interest in baby dolls.

RG: Besides my Lando Calrissian action figure, based on the character from *The Empire Strikes Back*, the only other Black dolls I remember having or playing with at friends' houses, were from the 3 3/4-inch G.I. Joe line by Hasbro. This was the mid-1980s. There were several major Black characters, and the cards they came with had these detailed backstories about their education, skills, and personalities—kind of like what Shindana had done with Slade Super Agent a decade earlier. Hasbro also had a special mail-in

offer where you could get a miniature figure of “The Fridge,” the nickname of Chicago Bears football star William Perry. He was a favorite. But Mattel’s He-Man, another line I loved, didn’t have any Black characters, at least not when I was playing with it. Neither did the other toys I played with often, Lego and Playmobil.

DC: I remember the old-fashioned dolls that belonged to my mother and aunts. I discovered them in an old trunk stored in the attic of my grandparents’ house. None of the dolls was Black. Their limbs were composed of straw filling with a plain muslin covering. All wore traditional dresses stressed by age, faded pink cheeks, and blond hair. I remember the doll heads were rather heavy and carefully painted. They obviously had been valuable playthings long ago. There were combs and mirrors, costume jewelry, dresses both homemade and manufactured. My grandmother Susie made corn silk babies for relatives when she was a girl in Tennessee. A gleaming black Singer sewing machine controlled the landing on the second-floor bedroom where Susie kept her chair, sewing patterns and a roll of cloth in a bag.

My childhood was during the late 1940s into the 1950s. I had love for a stuffed rabbit, a worn teddy bear, a red-and-white dog, and piggy bank that lived atop my chest of drawers. The top drawer held grade school photos, a whistle, bubble gum, pens, paper, key chains, and other junk. There wasn’t a lot of visiting inside playmates’ homes. I guess it was a Midwest thing—privacy, keeping the other at a distance. As an only child, I learned to make as many friends as possible but also was aware that the racial composition of the neighborhood was mainly white. My childhood friendships were often close and long lasting. It was understood children were a different species from their parents. Our play, running, jumping, imagining, was our world. Parents still allowed childhood to exist.

Summer meant Chinese checkers, flying kites that touched clouds, drawing a ring in the dirt, “lagging in,” and trying to capture—some said steal—as many marbles as possible. This was a boy’s world but not completely. My best friend for many years was Sherry, a blond girl who lived down the street with her grandmother, mom, and younger sister. Sherry collected thread, paper dolls, and phonograph records. Whether they admitted it or not, more than a few boys indulged these traditionally girl pastimes on a cloudy day. I’ll always remember Sherry and her family. They never cared that I was different.

White parents and Black parents were watchful about gender. Midwest kids could hang and play, but there were limits to what friendship might mean. The kids who created strong friendship bonds knew, without directly discussing the issue, that as Black and white, we could only go so far. My mother warned that white kids could “act funny” when they got older and my need to trust “the outside world” could bring pain. She knew I blithely pursued friendships until it became clear that I could never be “one of them.” She was right. I learned the importance of imaginary friendships, depended more completely on the reality of the natural world, and tried to understand a complicated life.

AJP: How would you like Shindana Toys to be remembered?

RG: Just as this country is finally coming to understand the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense as not a vigilante group but a national community movement that served Black Americans when federal and city governments would not, with chapters creating breakfast programs and health clinics, I hope we will remember Shindana as part of something bigger and more multifaceted than a successful business venture. To quote something my colleague Yolanda has said, “Shindana was not your typical toy factory.” And it’s true in so many ways. Here is a nonprofit, activist toy company that hired from the community and then returned its profits to invest in and nurture that same community. This was not business for private gain. This was business for the people—and at every level. If young people could learn about the vibrancy, creativity, and idealism that characterized the Black Power era by learning about Shindana, that would be something.

DC: Lou Smith did not place limits on his imagination. He was an activist Black man. Competitive, funny, ambitious, and tired of second-class thinking. He had love for the world community. The racist political, educational, and business format locked Black entrepreneurs out of the game. It was rigged like the postslavery Jim Crow madness. CORE gave Lou a platform for his intellect and an intention to make a difference. Shindana was the shining jewel of his possibility. In South Central Los Angeles, Lou and Robert Hall swept up the glass and convinced a large group of diverse and talented Angelenos to venture onto Central Avenue. What happened was remarkable and life changing for a large number of people. I, like many others, benefitted from just being around the change that transformed an oppressed community. I had no doubt that Lou and Robert would achieve the renaissance called Operation Bootstrap. They had wind in their sail,

strength in their step. They modeled finding oneself. Removing the blinders from the eyes of talented Black folk who never before had a couple of Black men saying, “You can do it. I’ll help you.” This is the gift of Shindana. It brought all of us closer to our own brilliance and possibility. It showed a lot of Black folk that they were on a path called success. That they deserved and would remember Shindana, the factory, children, the achievement that no one could take from them.

YH: They touch on all the most important and beautiful parts. I hope its legacy lives on and that the people involved, Lou, Robert, and all the community members, are remembered.