

Aesthetic Resistance: Racist Visual Tropes and the Oppositional Gaze in Joel Christian Gill's *Tales of the Talented Tenth*

Contemporary graphic novelist Joel Christian Gill is the originator of the hashtag #28DaysIsNotEnough, a social media rally call to celebrate African American history beyond the bounds of the February calendar. Gill's comics art works in concert with this activist hashtag; in his series *Tales of the Talented Tenth*, Gill is creating biographical graphic novels about lesser-known African American historical figures for a child audience. Bass Reeves (1838-1910), for instance, main character of the first installment of *Tales*, was an escaped slave who became the first African American Deputy U.S. Marshal and who was likely the inspiration for the Lone Ranger. Bessie Stringfield (1911-1993), subject of the second installment, was known as the "The Motorcycle Queen of Miami" and was the first black woman to travel across the country by motorcycle—which she did eight times by her early twenties. I contend, however, that Gill's project is significant beyond the capturing of such stories; more than widening the scope of historical persons through which African American history is understood, Gill employs the comics medium in formal and stylistic ways that confront racism and promote anti-racist agency.

In particular, Gill's use of two key visual tropes in *Tales*—blackface minstrel figures and crows—materializes racist concepts and practices while also resisting them by revising historically inscribed relations between signifier and signified, authority and subaltern. Furthermore, by positioning these tropes in relation to an oppositional gaze, the graphic novels also invite their child readers to witness and engage in a politics of looking that confronts and critically engages cultural scripts of oppression. In taking on this examination, I draw on two related contextual frameworks: blackface minstrelsy and its attendant (and persistent) racial visual vocabulary, and the concepts of double consciousness and the oppositional gaze. I then turn to a close reading of the use of minstrel faces and crows in *Tales of the Talented Tenth*, exploring the ways Gill employs formal elements of the comics medium to trouble, resist, and eventually subvert racist visuals of blackness and posit the oppositional gaze as a seat of empowerment for his child readers.