

2023 Fellowship Recipient

Marc Blanc

African American Literature and Leftist Publishing in the Heartland, 1877–1940

My dissertation, *The Radical Midwest: African American Literature and Leftist Publishing in the Heartland, 1877–1940*, highlights understudied sites of interracial literary activism. Decentering New York and Paris as the capitals of literary and political avant-gardes, I argue that Black migration to the Midwest over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resulted in revolutionary political alliances that found cultural expression in underground presses. The stories of independent publishers in “minor” locations such as Cincinnati, St. Louis, and the Great Plains reveal that working-class writers and editors have used modest means to collaborate across the color line for a century and a half. My project examines the editorial and literary choices that Midwestern radicals made to facilitate these collaborations. Publishing what I call the “radical Midwest” entailed the racial and regional challenges of distributing literature across rural spaces, negotiating modal translations between oral and printed texts, and producing leftist writing that privileged the experiences of middle-American readers over political and aesthetic demands from Europe or Moscow. Through archival research and close textual analysis, I chart a previously unidentified network of Black and white literary radicals. Central figures and publications include orator Peter H. Clark and the socialist Emancipator newspaper, the vanity presses of novelists Sutton E. Griggs and Oscar Micheaux, the cooperatively owned publishing houses of Charles H. Kerr and Pauline Hopkins, and Jack Conroy’s Anvil/New Anvil, Communist-aligned literary magazines that published Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Langston Hughes. By establishing small presses as major sites of Midwestern literary history, I challenge the scholarly assumption of de facto segregation in heartland radicalism and reassert the importance of regional print cultures to the international success of Wright and Brooks.

Mark Blanc is a graduate student in the English department at Washington University in St. Louis.