
Atlantic Connections

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Abstract

Juanita Harrison's *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* (1936) is a travel book composed of personal letters written over the course of eight years. An African American who supported herself with stints of domestic service, Harrison grew up in Mississippi but viewed herself as a Californian while traveling the world. "I am proud I choosed Calif. for my home before I left as every one know it," she explained. This regional claim was in large part enabled by enduring ties with past employers in Los Angeles, George and Myra K. Dickinson. The Dickinsons invested Harrison's savings in real estate, provided her with a permanent U.S. address, and helped manage her affairs from afar. They were also steadfast correspondents whose generous letters spurred Harrison's own narrative production. Much of *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* is composed of the letters Harrison sent them, and the book is dedicated to them. Recently discovered letters from Harrison to one Alice M. Foster, however, demonstrate that Harrison had another important source of California support and inspiration. Foster was also a working-class African American who hailed from Mississippi, and she and her husband were some of Pasadena's earliest black residents. She and Harrison corresponded regularly, and the letters Harrison sent Foster were assessed for inclusion in *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World*. Miriam Matthews, California's first African American librarian, commemorated Foster's contribution to Harrison's journey and authorship with an exhibit at a local Los Angeles library. In their discussions of her achievement, however, Harrison's editor, publisher, and reviewers ignored Foster entirely in favor of lauding past employers like the Dickinsons. White patronage was a familiar story that was easy to tell. An enabling friendship between two African American women-including a shared epistolary project-was not. This presentation redresses the omission.

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