

For Harriett's Bookshop Owner Jeannine Cook, at the Root of Everything Is Connection

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Harriett's Bookshop Owner Jeannine Cook Says Connection Is at the Root of Everything

The mother, mentor, and activist believes in connecting individuals within a community.

By Arianna ReboliniPublished: Feb 28, 2022



Jeannine Cook knew the requests were coming. Black History Month was around the corner, and Cook—owner of Harriett's Bookshop in Philadelphia, a store named after Harriet Tubman and founded on a mission to “celebrate women authors, women artists, and women activists”—had gotten used to overwhelming interest in her store. She knows Harriett's is an attractive partner for companies planning Black-focused campaigns, and that her name carries significant cultural cachet already at just two years old. Some of those partnerships have been fruitful and inspiring—Will Smith's book launch, a limited edition high-top

collaboration with Vans, and even an ongoing paid internship program with local teens—but Cook was wary of the specific emphasis on Black History Month and how such a short-lived focus can veer into tokenizing Blackness.

So she went a different route. On February 1, from the store’s Twitter account, Cook announced a monthlong vow of silence: “Something deep inside is saying to close our mouths and observe this month from a distance. To place space between ourselves and what this month has become. And to listen for what’s next.”

“There’s this commercialization of Black History Month and of Blackness in general.”

“It’s been pretty, pretty interesting,” Cook told me, laughing, on a late-night phone call halfway through the month. (Cook remains silent from sunup to sundown.) A vow of silence would be a difficult adjustment for anyone, but especially so for an almost impossibly busy hands-on business owner like Cook, who not only owns and manages two sister stores she describes as “central to [her] family unit,” but is also a mother, mentor, and activist, currently studying for an MFA in creative writing at Drexel University. Her decision to go silent has been a way to replenish her mind and spirit, but it’s also a statement—a way to, hopefully, push people to consider the value of the messages they see and deliver in their daily lives.

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“There’s this commercialization of Black History Month and of Blackness in general, without real retribution,” Cook tells me. “We can’t skip that part, or we won’t get the full lesson.”

All of this to say: Cook isn’t interested in gestures at progress. She wants the real, hard work—and she’s doing a lot of it.

Cook opened Harriett’s Bookshop in the historically white, working-class neighborhood Fishtown in February 2020. Six weeks later, Covid shut its doors, but Cook, as she’s wont to do, found the opportunities hidden in the setback. First, she brought the shop online, launching a campaign that allowed customers to buy books for essential workers and write out personal thank-you notes to send along with them. Inspired by the campaign’s success—the initial inventory sold out in the first hour—Cook brought the shop to the street, selling books on the sidewalk in front of the store. It worked: The business thrived, but more significantly, its community grew. In April 2021, Cook launched a GoFundMe in an effort to stop renting and buy a permanent home for Harriett’s, with an ambitious goal of \$300,000. The campaign raised \$75,000 in the first weekend. (Cook purchased a new location in July, but the campaign, currently at \$237,000, remains open throughout construction and leading

up to the new location's opening.) In August of the same year, Cook opened Ida's Bookshop, a sister store a short drive away in Collingswood, New Jersey, named after the journalist and activist Ida B. Wells.

Cook describes Harriett's as "a bookshop meets an art gallery meets a monument." Staple titles from Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston are always available and on display, but inventory changes monthly, presented like exhibitions and designed in tandem with the store's merch and interior. This month, the focus has been reparations. [A February tweet from the store's account](#) shows a stack of books on the theme—including Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò's *Reconsidering Reparations*, Michael Albertus's *Property Without Rights*, and Natalie Baszile's *We Are Each Other's Harvest*, among others—and explains, "By the end of the month, folks should be speaking a common language and have actionable steps for how to implement new ideas—together."

These are stores but they're also experiences, testaments to the world Cook wants to see and evidence such a world is worth pursuing. Customers who visit on Sundays will browse while a live choir sings some of Harriet Tubman's favorite spirituals. In January, local musician Veronica Hudson played the vibraphone in-store. The store's basement, called the "underground," is a dark room that visitors browse with candles—an homage to "ancestors who had to hide to read." There are days dedicated to silent browsing. And the Harriett's experience extends beyond its walls: Earlier this month, Cook launched the Sisterhood Sit-in Trolley Tour, a two-hour tour through Black women-owned businesses in Philadelphia. Sisterhood means support, and Cook takes it seriously. She describes herself as a communitarian, guided by an ideology that emphasizes the connection between the individual and the community—she returns to the refrain "I am because you are; you are because I am" multiple times in our conversation—and this philosophy has been ingrained in Harriett's since the very beginning, down to the name.

When talking about Tubman, Cook's passion is palpable, especially when she reflects on Tubman's willingness to put her life at risk to save others. "She showed through her life what it means to really care about humanity. You can have your freedom, but it's not enough if others don't, right? It's as much about the self as it is about the collective. How much better of a society would we have if more people thought like that?"

Cook also draws inspiration from the traditional West African storyteller known as a griot, a role Cook embraces for herself—a storyteller, but also a "community historian"—with both pride and humility.

"It's important for folks to understand that there are people who have already laid the foundation for what we seek to do with our society, but if we're not connecting the dots through stories, we'll keep feeling like we have to start from scratch."

These themes—collective care and the importance of storytelling—have been consistent threads in all of Cook’s many, varied projects, and throughout her life. The middle of three daughters raised by a single mother living with blindness, Cook understood community meant survival from an early age: Often, their family relied on food from their neighbors. As an undergraduate student at Philadelphia’s University of the Arts, she launched an outreach organization called Positive Minds that led local youth and their families in creative community building projects incorporating art and technology. She funded its launch by selling used books on the street. She launched a program called Community with a simple aim to connect neighbors by learning each other’s names. As a teacher and a consultant, she’s brought artists, musicians, and writers to classrooms, facilitated intergenerational communication through workshops, and developed anti-racism curriculum. Throughout, reading and writing have remained vital: She’s currently working on her memoir. And as for future projects, there’s plenty in store, including an upcoming redesign built around *The 1619 Project*, an ongoing campaign—sponsored by U.S. Representative Brendan Boyle—to make Harriet Tubman Day (March 10) a federal holiday, and possibly building out a virtual bookstore experience. It’s a lot, but for Cook, it’s worth it.

“At the root of everything, for me, is connection—real, genuine, authentic connection,” she tells me. “I have found that in books. I have found that in stories. I have found that sitting at the feet of people like Toni Morrison who make me feel like I have a home, I have a place. I need to make that connection for me, and now I see many more people need it than I realized before. No matter what, that’s what I’m going to continue to do.”