

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by Carrie Ayagaduk Ojanen, 2020

Speaker: Carrie Ayagaduk Ojanen

Date of recording: July 13, 2020

Location: Maple Valley, Washington, poet's home

Length: 6 minutes, 36 seconds

START OF RECORDING

Carrie Ayagaduk Ojanen: This is Carrie Ayagaduk Ojanen reading "Tiimiaq, something carried," for Joan Naviyuk Kane.

[Carrie Ayagaduk Ojanen reads "Tiimiaq, something carried,"]

CAO: Unga Ayagaduk. I am Ayagaduk. My name is Carrie Ayagaduk Ojanen. Ayagaduk is the name my aapa gave me. My mom said when I was born my aapa looked at me and said, "Ayagaduk, at last you came back!" I was named for his favorite grandfather. My aaka and aapa, Cecilia and Edward Muktoyuk, Sr., were fluent Inupiaq speakers of the Ugiuvamiut dialect. We are Ugiuvamiut, King Islanders. Ugiuvamiut from Ugiuvak, King Island, a rocky island 60 miles off the coast of the Seward Peninsula in Alaska in the abundant waters of the Bering Sea.

My mom, Ruth Ayagiaq Ojanen, too, was a fluent speaker of Inupiaq as a girl. When the BIA closed the school on King Island in the 60s and wouldn't send another teacher, the King Islanders were forced to relocate to Nome and beyond to meet federal education requirements for their children. She forgot how to speak Inupiaq in the all-English public school in Nome. She had to ask a friend to teach her as a teenager.

It is a painful loss to lose one's language. It hurts everyone: parent, child, grandchildren. I was an English and French double major in college. Learning French from books and in classes made me more confident to try to learn Inupiaq from books and to try to teach my children what I learn. It's not easy. The dictionary I have is not published, it's a copy of the book draft. It's easy to get discouraged. But watching my bright and eager children, I feel hope that the efforts I make will take root.

I dedicated this poem to Joan Naviyuk Kane. I never thought I would make it to King Island in this lifetime. But she raised funds and chartered a fishing vessel and invited me along. Along with Bernadette Alvanna-Stimpfle and Marilyn Koezuna-Irelan, both deeply involved in Inupiaq language and cultural preservation and teaching. Seeing our home island, climbing its steep cliffside, standing beside my grandparents' small home made me realize it's still there. It's still there. We can go back. The puffin, murre, and kittiwake are still there. We are still here. And we can be reunited. We Ugiuvamiut and our Ugiuvak. It draws us home. Perhaps someday my children or their children or their children's children will again live in its abundant embrace.

I am indebted in my poetry to the dedicated dancers, singers, carvers, beautiful and functional garment makers, artists, story tellers, poets, and linguists, of my people. I am one of many and indebted to them all.

END OF RECORDING