

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by Joan Naviyuk Kane, 2020

Speaker: Joan Naviyuk Kane

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Location: Cambridge, Massachusetts

Length: 4 minutes, 49 seconds

START OF RECORDING

Joan Naviyuk Kane: I am Joan Naviyuk Kane. This is a poem called “Rookeries.”

[Joan Naviyuk Kane reads “Rookeries”]

JNK: Uvaᅇa atiga Naviyuk. Ugiuvaᅇmiuguruᅇa suli Qawiaramiuguruᅇa. Apaigia John Kokuluk suli aanaigia Barbara Anamaq. I am called for my namesake Naviyuk. I am from King Island and Mary’s Igloo, Alaska. My grandparents are John and Barbara Kokuluk.

This poem, “Rookeries,” is in part a poem about the ivory carvings that my grandfather carved, and the ivory carvings he taught my uncles to carve, and other young men of King’s Island as well.

My grandfather, John Kokuluk, made a living as a renowned hunter and ivory carver. He spoke only Inupiaq. People who knew him, including Ron Senungetuk, who passed away in January 2020 after a distinguished career in the humanities and arts, told me once that the King Island dialect of Inupiaq that my grandfather spoke was like Shakespeare’s English. My grandfather was a master hunter of marine mammals—aigviq, niqsaq, ugruk (walrus, seal, bearded seal) in the moving sea ice of the waters of the imaaq, what we now call the Bering Sea. He obtained and made with other King Islanders the technology and materials he needed to support our family and community members through ancient, unwritten traditions, passed down through countless generations of a highly sophisticated culture of ingenuity, determination, and knowledge-sharing across a rich and complex ecosystem in the arctic and subarctic.

The Catholic church arranged his marriage to my grandmother, who had been orphaned in the pandemic of 1918, after the Ursuline nuns who raised her decided at nearly the last minute to marry her off instead of sending her to further her education, which was unusual for any young

woman in the early 1930s. She raised nine children—my aunts and uncles—into adulthood on Ugivuk and in east end of Siqnazuak (Nome, Alaska). Ugiuvak, roughly translated, means a place to spend the winter—ugiu means year or winter, vak can be translated as place. In the highly-segregated gold rush town of Nome, King Islanders at times lived in dwellings like these for much of the 20th century until the entire King Island mainland village on the eastern outskirts of Nome was destroyed by a 100-year flood in the 1970s. This was, of course, after the entire village of King Island was relocated to Siqnazuak, the mainland (Nome), in 1959 when Alaska became a state.

King Islanders are known as master walrus ivory carvers. My grandfather participated in the cash economy primarily by selling ivory carvings. He carved in one of the men's houses on King Island. He taught many young men, including my uncles, to carve and to learn our subsistence practices.

This poem is in part about the rookeries he carved out of walrus ivory and the ones he taught my uncles and other young men to carve.

I never learned how to carve ivory. In some ways, I think this poem is a way to carve language and to make something lyric out of the past and the present. It also relates to my life as a mother, and relates to my children as King Islanders as well—my sons.

END OF RECORDING