

# ICELANDIC KAMI

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## Abstract

*Utamakura* is a traditional Japanese technique of recognizing, interpreting, and utilizing the web of intertextual meanings which have accrued around particular place names over centuries of poetic practice. In general, these *utamakura* places were originally (in the 7th-9th centuries) associated with Shintō gods (kami), though in later periods the web of meanings in most cases came to include (and often became dominated by) secular rather than spiritual associations. Japanese poet Takahashi Mutsuo, who has published both poetic and theoretical works on the subject of *utamakura*, seeks to recover the original spiritual power of *utamakura* place names. He has also expanded the concept to include places of mythic spiritual importance outside of Japan, mostly in the Greco-Roman world.

Taking inspiration from Takahashi's revivification of this mediaeval poetic device, I am currently in the midst of a three-year project to write a series of (at this point seven) multimedia chamber music pieces called the *utamakura* series, pieces inspired alternately by traditional Japanese locations and locations in Northern Europe. My 2018 piece *utamakura 2: Arnardalar* for violin, piano, and fixed audiovisual media is an exploration of the Icelandic valley of Arnardalur in the Westfjords, the setting of a key early scene in the *Fóstbræðra saga*. My work draws on both the saga's descriptions of the place and the current place as it is today, highlighting the flux of time and exploring the power of art to infuse itself into – and change perceptions of – physical locations.

In this paper, I will explain the conceptual processes involved in writing the piece, with an emphasis on the intercultural aesthetic of my work and how Japanese philosophy of art and religion can offer a creative new perspective on the Scandinavian lands which are the settings of the North's oldest literature.

**Keywords:** *utamakura; Ueda Shizuteru; Takahashi Mutsuo; Nō; Japanese aesthetics; Icelandic sagas; Fóstbræðra saga; Intercultural artistic practice; Multimedia music*

## Introduction

My first day in Iceland was the last that the aurora borealis could be seen from Reykjavík in the winter of 2018. It was also, despite being mid-March, warm enough to not need to wear a jacket. A perennial sign of seasonal change and an unseasonable 'warm wave', these were also reminders that neither weather nor celestial phenomena – nor, indeed anything – exists permanently. Whatever we hope and fear – the increasing amount of energy (and thus volatility) in our global climatic systems, the destruction of manmade cultural artefacts of the past, extinction of animals, or death – the only thing we can know about the future for sure is that it will be different from the present.

I had come to Iceland to make audio recordings, take videos, and begin composing a piece for violin, piano, and those audiovisual field recordings. I did this over three weeks at the ArtsIceland residency in Ísafjörður in Vestfirðir (Westfjords), the remote northwest region of the country. This is a part of the country rich in history, legend, and cultural activity. It is also the least densely populated area of this already sparsely populated island; as I drove north from Reykjavík through heavy, dark mountains and snowy landscapes melting before my eyes in the unexpected warmth, I passed through fewer and fewer – and tinier and tinier – human settlements.



Figure 1. Unseasonably warm drive north along Route 60, 20 March 2018. Photo: Daryl Jamieson.

Travelling alone – both in the sense of being by myself in the car, and not seeing another vehicle for tens of kilometres at a time – I often stopped and got out to breathe in the landscape and observe the air, to get – as much as I could – a physical sense of the land I was driving through, to get out of the high-tech steel and glass bubble I was encased in and which ‘protected’ me from nature. I tried to listen, not only to the ephemeral sounds of the moment, but to reach back with my ears into the past, to do what landscape archaeologist Matthew Johnson claims it is ‘blindingly obvious’ that one cannot do – that is, to ‘stand in the middle of a muddy field or on top of a hill ... listen very carefully [and hear the past]’ (Johnson 2012, 519).

Of course, Johnson is correct to say that ‘you will hear nothing of the past’, and I didn’t. Though sounds are simply vibrations of the air, vibrations simply energy, and energy perpetually conserved, even if there might theoretically be a way to map the

movements of all the particles in the universe at any given moment and extrapolate back to the vibrations they would have been making at a certain point in history so as to be able to listen in the present to the sounds of the past, such a feat would require such an astounding amount of data as to be literally impossible in practice. Empiricism, though useful as a tool ('intense empiricism is the first step to immanence' (Macfarlane 2015, 66)), cannot fully describe even the present moment (and to which of the constantly changing presents does the word 'present' refer?) to the degree of precision which science seems to promise, lest, like Borges' 1:1 map in 'On Exactitude in Science', the detail overwhelm the object of observation (and let's not get into the weird things that occur when particles at the quantum level are observed). No, to have a soundscape archaeology back beyond the era of sound recording – to 'hear' the past – one needs imagination and documentation: art, diaries, literature, the legends and stories of oral cultures.

The project I had come to Iceland to execute was not in any way empirical. It was a philosophical exploration of the fanciful concept of soundscape archaeology, via the ontology of the Kyoto School philosophers and revived medieval Japanese poetics, a fusion of a conceptual, intercultural approach to sound- and video-art with intuitive musical response. The piece which occupied most of my time in Ísafjörður is part of a series of works called the '*utamakura* series', the overarching aim of which is a re-enchantment of landscape in the present via the artistic and spiritual traces of the past and projection of hopes and fears for the future.

### ***Utamakura***

*Utamakura* are fundamentally names of famous places. In the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Japanese poetry was taking form and establishing its conventions, these would have been places of spiritual significance or the sites of famous battles. These amounted to the same thing, since when a hero is killed in battle, he would become a *kami* – a word which can mean anything from a local spirit within a rock, tree, or mountain to a human soul, all the way to the omnipotent monotheistic god of the Abrahamic faiths. In this early period, the place names which would later become *utamakura* were used literally, to evoke the beauty of nature (and hence worship or appease the *kami* who resided in that sacred spot and lent their beauty and power to it) or to commemorate directly or obliquely a fallen hero at the spot where he fell (and hence placate the *kami* that he had since become) (Takahashi 2011, 123).

In later centuries, from the Heian period on, the use of *utamakura* place names became more conventionalized and abstract. As the composition of poetry increasingly became an urban, aristocratic pastime and less involved with the spirits of the land and the rhythms of nature, poets' use of *utamakura* came to have much less to do with the places the names signified – and even less to do with any commemoration of battles that had been fought centuries prior – and more to do with the associations these words had accrued. These associations developed out of the themes of the original poem or poems to have used the place name, themes such as beauty, betrayal, intrigue, or more generic seasonal occurrences like the blooming of cherry blossoms or viewing the full moon.

This is when these place names became *utamakura*, when they stopped signifying events and places in the real world and began to symbolize poetic ideas.

Poets and other artists began to use these words as a shorthand, an intertextual reference to both the landscape itself and – increasingly more importantly – to the emotional world manifested by the previous poem(s) that had previously made use of them. As the centuries passed, the same *utamakura* place names<sup>1</sup> continued to be used, and with each poem – or *nō* play, or painting – that made use of the word, the web of associated meanings increased, so that, by the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century, the poet Shōtetsu could say that the *utamakura* Mount Yoshino *is* the cherry blossom in spring and Tatsuta River *is* the maple leaf in autumn (Takahashi 2005, 161). The putative place names no longer referred to their physical locations at all; emptied of their conventional meaning they came to exist solely in an abstract poetic world.

The word *utamakura* (歌枕) itself literally means ‘poem pillow’. Analogically, pillows being the place where you set your head (especially at night, to sleep, to dream, to go into another world), the *utamakura* could be conceived of as a place where one sets one’s poem. Poet Takahashi Mutsuo suggests another etymology for *makura*. *Kura* can be read as ‘seat’ (座), and *ma* can be read as both ‘truth’ (真) and ‘space between’ (間). In this way, he suggests, *makura* might mean ‘the seat of truth is in the void’. This Buddhist interpretation of *makura* resonates with Fujiwara Shunzei’s use of Tendai Buddhist terminology to explain *utamakura*’s poetic effect on our perception of reality. In Shunzei’s view, the false (that is, conventionally real) view of an *utamakura* place is the one seen through the inescapably subjective eyes of a visitor. The literate viewer’s view of the landscape, however, is ‘immediately modified by textual knowledge’ (Marra 2010, 66). The resulting hybrid perception of landscape is a Middle Way: neither the pure abstraction of Shōtetsu nor false trust in fallible human perceptual faculties, but an interdependent combination of both. We see through lenses of poets’ words.

Kyoto-School philosopher Ueda Shizuteru’s tri-level theory of language is a contemporary attempt to understand how language shapes human perception. Ueda’s three levels are sign words (words which manifest mental objects in a one-to-one fashion), symbol words (words which suggest or metonymically allude to larger, more abstract concepts), and hollow words (words which do not signify things in the conventional world, i.e. poetic, humorous, absurd, or religious language). Hollow words can trigger an aesthetic response in the listener which suddenly throws them into an understanding of the world as it really is (i.e., radically interdependent, hollow, void, empty), thus giving poetry and art a soteriological function (Ueda 2011, 776).<sup>2</sup> Or, to paraphrase using less religious language, poetry (art) expands minds by introducing conceptual layers on top of what is conventionally called ‘reality’, modifying how ‘reality’ itself is perceived, and thus demonstrating that there is more to ‘reality’ than

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<sup>1</sup> There are around 2000 *utamakura*, though this number includes ones that literally every educated Japanese person knows and others that even experts would have to check their reference books to identify.

<sup>2</sup> Cf my more in-depth summary of Ueda’s system in relation to music (Jamieson 2018, 332-334).

the viewer/listener had previously been aware. This is the function of art that I like to think of as a kind of re-enchantment.

### **Saga landscapes**

During the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, overlapping with Shunzei's development of a Buddhist interpretation of Japanese poetry and the period when the ancient art of *sarugaku* was being refined into *nō* (to which I will return), in Iceland centuries of traditional oral storytelling were being written down in the form of the sagas. As Shunzei implanted Buddhist spiritual meaning into *utamakura* which had begun centuries earlier as spells to worship and appease Shintō *kami*, in a somewhat parallel manner, the predominantly Christian saga writers were also looking back on a time in their country's history when Iceland had been governed by Old Norse pagan religious and social codes. As in the Japanese case, while the culturally more powerful, systematised religion (Buddhism / Christianity) had superseded the native, diffuse, animist one (Shintō / paganism) in the official writing of the period, in both countries the native animist religions continued to be practiced, albeit in modified forms.<sup>3</sup>

However, my principal concern here is with the various ways in which landscape is and has been perceived, and not religion *per se*. There is a significant emphasis on the land, movement through the landscape, and human interventions on the landscape (in the sense of farms and settlements) in the Icelandic sagas that mark out a unique relationship between these texts and the land they describe. As the foundational texts of Icelandic literature, taught in schools and known to a certain extent by the entire literate population, they undoubtedly contribute an *utamakura*-like layer of literary allusion that affects how Icelandic people perceive the landscape of their country.

Emily Lethbridge has written of the 'persuasiveness' of the idea of landscape itself as the original manuscript of the sagas, one which 'is best regarded as a palimpsest – a manuscript which is characterised by multiple stages and reuse, with accretions of text building up over time, newer text being written over older, scraped-away text' (Lethbridge 2016, 55). She describes how, in the Age of Settlement (874-930), the newly arrived settlers carved meaning out of the landscape through naming, and how the saga writers subsequently (centuries later) used these names to enhance (or even create) their narratives. Jürg Glauser called this 'a transformation of nature into culture' and a 'semioticization of the landscape' (Glauser 2000, 209). This imposition of 'culture' on 'nature' allowed for narratives to be preserved – for the first settlers and later heroes to be remembered via the places where they lived and loved, fought and fell. In an oral culture, as Iceland largely was prior to Christianization, this also helped people understand the landscape and to be able to 'read' it and orient themselves in it.

As with *utamakura* words and the poems in which they are mentioned, as the time when a place was named retreated further into the past, the associations of place names and their meanings evolved and widened. Lethbridge relates several examples from the

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<sup>3</sup> Though there is no space here to develop the idea, I am intrigued by the similarities between Japanese *kami* and the elves who are said to populate Iceland to this day (see generally Hall 2007, 21-53)

sagas where, despite the saga itself explaining the etymology of a particular place based on a so-called historical incident in the saga, the preponderance of evidence suggests that the saga author was in fact inventing stories based on place names, rather than the places being named after actual historical events (cf. Lethbridge 2016, 60-66). So while human habitation, other natural forces, and simply time itself slowly changed the physical environment of Iceland, the place names, myths, and sagas passed down both orally and in writing, as well as personal memories and family legends, continued to impress their meanings on the landscape as well. Shunzei's Tendai-inspired explication of the function of *utamakura* is also applicable to places which play a role in the sagas: when we view them, the perceptual data we receive through our senses are 'immediately modified' by the cultural data we associate with that place; we see a palimpsest of the present (nature) overwritten by the past (culture).



Figure 2. The location of Gísli's farmstead, just west of Þingeyri (30 March 2018).

Photo: Daryl Jamieson

Where *utamakura* theory adds something unique to what has already been amply explored by scholars of and writers on the sagas is the recognition of transience as a fundamental principle and its resistance to any identification of the layers of the palimpsest. Shunzei's Middle Way may not go in for pure abstraction (a nihilistic interpretation of the idea that the ground of reality is emptiness), but it recognizes that, to paraphrase Heraclitus, you can never look at the same sight twice; you certainly can not visit 'the place' where, in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, Gísli lived and where Vestein was murdered, for example. Thus, since all things are in a constant state of change of arising

and subsiding (i.e. birth and death; *samsāra*), there is a certain Idealism (in the Kantian sense) in how we interpret the experience of this palimpsest of landscape and legend, nature and culture. When we are at a location mentioned in a saga, it should be ‘blindingly obvious’ that we are not seeing the same sights, any more than we can hear the same sounds, that the characters in the sagas – or those who, centuries later, wrote them down – would have seen or heard. Each of us has our own cultural context – some of which is shared with our fellow citizens, but some of which is unique to ourselves – so we will all experience the same landscape through our own lenses. Even if you stand at the site of the farm<sup>4</sup> where he lived you will never be able to experience the same landscape that Gísli did – but nor can you experience even the same landscape that the person standing next to you does. An understanding, an appreciation of the palimpsest of landscape in this way allows us to traverse all three of Ueda’s language levels at once: the sign (the landscape as pure physical presence at a particular moment in time [i.e., now]), the symbol (the cultural, legendary, literary history connected with the place), and the hollow (the liberatingly paradoxical realisation of the impossibility of experiencing the myriad unique strands of interdependent connections linking you to both the signal and symbolic interpretations of the scene in front of you whilst simultaneously, overwhelmingly, actually experiencing it). In a Zen manner, one transcends the build up of intertextual cultural associations to return to an even purer (hollow) experience of the land itself. This direct, unmediated experience is unachievable without first moving through and overcoming the cultural (symbolic) level.

## Nō

My ‘utamakura series’ is a (projected<sup>5</sup>) series of seven pieces united by their use of field recordings in combination with small chamber groups of traditional and modern European/American instruments (with the ensembles ranging in size from soloists to a septet). Conceived as instrumental dramas, each piece in my series is conceptually ‘set’ in a particular place, which is where the field recordings were made. Like Takahashi Mutsuo’s *utamakura awase* (2005) (a collection of contemporary *utamakura*-based *waka* poems), which alternates between Japanese places and foreign ones (mostly locations related to ancient Greece and Rome), my series alternates between traditional Japanese places (the odd-numbered pieces are set in Nara, Matsuo, Kamakura, and Shiogama) and places in northern Europe (the even-numbered pieces are set in Arnardalur, Iceland, St Dunstan-in-the-East, London, and Gotland, Sweden). Also like Takahashi, who has sought to revivify the spiritual element of *utamakura* in order to rescue them from meaningless formalism and empty word games, I also want to both internalize and thence transcend the cultural associations of my chosen locations and rediscover the divinity of – the *kami* manifest in – the land itself.

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<sup>4</sup> Or watch it on video, as you can in the excellent documentary about landscape and memory in the sagas made by the aforementioned Emily Lethbridge (Chadwick 2012).

<sup>5</sup> As of April 2020, five of the seven are complete.



The musico-dramatic structure of my pieces is inspired by *nō*, a genre of sung and danced drama which – heavily inspired by the poetry of the previous centuries – came to its current form (more or less) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. *Nō* are often set in *utamakura* locations, and frequently quote *waka* poems directly or refer to them indirectly (Zeami 2006, 112-113). *Nō* is, to a certain extent, a spiritual drama; when *nō* was being formed by Kan’ami and his son Zeami, their troupe was associated with Tōdaiji temple and Kasuga shrine in Nara. At that point in history, Zen was in its period of political ascendancy in Japan. Kan’ami’s success and new-found prestige allowed Zeami to be educated in a Zen temple (Wilson 2006, 43-44), and Zenchiku (Zeami’s son-in-law and official successor) was also highly knowledgeable about both Zen and Shintō. Japan was and is a syncretic religious society, seeing no particular issue with following the local Shintō and imported Buddhist (and Confucian) creeds simultaneously. *Nō* was performed in both Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples, and its texts show concern with the philosophies of both religions. Zenchiku wrote that *nō* ‘follows Shinto and Buddhist ritual, not personal preference’ (trans. Thornhill 1993, 166).

Studying *nō* was the principle reason why I first went to live in Japan, and it remains the wellspring of my fascination with the country and its culture. *Utamakura* were a later discovery for me, discovered as a result of their use in *nō*. Hence, though my cycle foregrounds ‘place’ as its defining element, and thus takes its name from the poetic device concerning place names, *nō* principles are the backbone of how I dramatize the stories of those places.

One of the *nō* styles defined by Zeami was *mugen nō*. In a typical *mugen nō* (*mugen* literally means ‘dreams [*mu*] and illusions [*gen*]’), there are only two speaking characters on stage: the first character to appear (the *waki*<sup>6</sup>) is a ‘traveller, often a vagrant monk whose station is somewhere between priest, shaman, and beggar’ (Wilson 2006, 27), in other words a character who, through his training, is knowledgeable of the spiritual world but, because of his low social status, is also very much aware of the trials of the conventional world. The second is the main character (*shite*). In the first half of the play, the *shite* manifests as a low-status local individual who strikes up a conversation with the *waki*. The *waki* asks about the history of the place (an *utamakura* place, and thus having some famous story or event attached to it) and then the *shite*, after first demurring, tells the story of the place. In the second half of the drama, the *shite* manifests as the main character of the story – she or he is, in fact, the spirit of the person they had been discussing in the first half, still attached to this place and unable to accept the inherent transience of things (i.e., unable to let go of their desire to be in the world, and thus now haunting it as a ghost). Usually – though not always, especially in Zenchiku’s works – the *waki* utilizes his Buddhist learning to enlighten the distressed spirit, allowing him or her to be released from their attachment and enter Nirvana. Some scholars read the second half (or indeed the entirety) of *mugen nō* dramas as occurring

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<sup>6</sup> *Waki* is the term for the secondary character in all forms of *nō*, and doesn’t specifically refer to the type of character played by the *waki* in *mugen nō*.



in the dreams of the wandering monks (Wilson 2006, 28), a reading with which I generally concur.

In my *utamakura* series, then, the instrument(s) take on the *shite*-like role of (wordlessly, of course) explicating the poetic and artistic history of the chosen setting, while the field recordings (and video, in those pieces that use video) show images and impressions of the place as it existed on the day(s) I visited them. There is no *waki* part *per se*, since I ascribe to the view that the *shite* actually manifests in the mind (dreams/illusions) of the *waki*, so in my *utamakura* pieces the audience – in whose minds the aural and visual stimuli I have created are manifesting new virtual worlds – are themselves all *waki*.

### **Manifesting Icelandic *kami*: *utamakura* 2: *Arnardalur***

My compositional praxis, in general, is to prepare a great deal of structural, textural, and extra-musical ideas and concepts over a long period of time, allow them to mingle and ferment in the *miso* of my brain, and – when the time feels right – to produce, as quickly and spontaneously as possible, the notes on the page. Though working with video and audio has somewhat altered that process (and has certainly slowed the creative production phase down), in writing *utamakura* 2: *Arnardalur*, I roughly followed that model. The ingredients that went into the series as a whole – animist landscape spirituality (*kami*), Buddhist poetics, *nō* dramatic forms – were fixed and developing in my head long before I went to Iceland. Once in Iceland, I set about looking at and around the landscape and listening to and through the soundscape, imagining the past sights and sounds, conjuring images out of my limited cultural knowledge and drawing on the deep Nordic (though not Icelandic) roots of my family's heritage. In Ísafjörður, through reading books and discussing with local people, I learned as much as I could about the history and spirituality of the area, especially the sagas set there and their reception in the present day.

In Ísafjörður, I was drawn to two sagas as promising source material for an *utamakura* piece – *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and the *Fóstbræðra saga* (The Saga of the Sworn Brothers).<sup>7</sup> My eventual choice for the setting of *utamakura* 2 was the valley of Arnardalur, which features in the eleventh chapter of *Fóstbræðra saga*. The story can be roughly summarized as follows. Þormóður sets out by ship from Bolungarvík travelling east through the Ísafjarðardjúp (a large fjord just north of the current town of Ísafjörður). Due to inclement weather, he lands at Arnardalur (about 12km from Bolungarvík) where he is taken in by a widowed mother and her daughter: Katla and Þorbjörg. Þormóður falls for Þorbjörg (nicknamed Kolbrún, or 'dark eyelashes' (Ross 2001, 39)), writes love verse so beautiful and of such lasting popularity that he thereafter becomes known as Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld (the poet of Kolbrún). But

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<sup>7</sup> I must thank Dr Emily Lethbridge at this point, whose exhaustive Icelandic Saga map – pinpointing every single location mentioned in every saga – was immensely useful in narrowing down my location choices (Lethbridge 2019).

eventually he feels the need to resume his journey to rejoin his sworn brother Þorgeirr, and so leaves the valley.

Of all the possible saga-related locations near Ísafjörður, Arnardalur intrigued me because it was a rare exploration of a romantic relationship in the saga literature, and Þorbjörg a rare example of an emotionally-complex female character in a saga.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld – the main male character in the scene, and one of the two sworn brothers of the title – was a skald (poet), an occupation that fit well with the generative poetic preoccupations of my overall project. Finally, later writers (e.g. Halldór Laxness<sup>9</sup>) had taken up this story and thus contributed new layers of cultural meaning to the location.

Though I will not here try to analyse my own piece, I will share a few of the techniques I used when writing it. Like a *nō* drama, the piece is divided into two halves. The first half focuses on sounds and images of the sea as recorded in Bolungarvík, the second on sounds and images of the land as recorded in the valley of Arnardalur (which has a river running through it). In the first half, the images and sounds are expansive, layering multiple images and sound files – like a palimpsest – in the fixed media part, and employing wide leaps across the full range of the violin and piano. I aimed to create an expansive feeling in these parts, increasing in density and intensity over the first eight minutes. All of the material is disjointed and fragmented – there are blackouts on the screen and silences in the instrumental and field recording parts – and the video and sound files are manipulated slightly to create an unsettled feeling of not-quite-realism.

The second part is the key section, exploring the love story. It is much more intimate, with the piano and violin sharing a duet in singable registers (the piano in a tenor register and the violin in a soprano one). The video plays continuously, with no blackouts and little manipulation (other than colour adjustments); it shows the valley in both close-up, intimate detail and more expansive sublimity. The audio is still fragmented, though it is also more present and less diffuse in quality than the field recordings used in the first half. These recordings consist largely of sounds of the river, melting ice, birds, and insects – the natural world intruding and/or complementing the love duet in the instrumental parts.

The romantic interlude is short-lived, however, and from 11:30 to the end, honour and duty calls Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld to return to his journey, leaving his lover Þorbjörg Kolbrún in the valley. This final section mixes wide shots of the sea (as seen from Arnardalur this time) with intimate shots of the valley, with the instruments also mixing textures and material from both previous sections. It ends with the sound of an airplane flying away from Ísafjörður airport over the valley, and noisy, high-pressure violin playing, while the video fades out over a close-up of an insect moving through the melting snow.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘In *Fóstbræðra saga* women tend to be more assertive than those in the core skald sagas and they also enjoy the poets’ love verses about them, which they and their kin recognise as public declarations of the poets’ affections’ (Ross 2001, 39).

<sup>9</sup> Laxness retold the *Fóstbræðra saga* in his 1952 novel *Gerpla*, translated as *Wayward Heroes* by Philip Roughton (2016).

The performance of the piece by Ilana Waniuk and Cheryl Duvall, the directors of Thin Edge New Music Collective (2014-19), on 6 September 2018 in Tokyo can be seen here: [https://youtu.be/TOvugK\\_ByZ8](https://youtu.be/TOvugK_ByZ8)



Figure 3. *Utamakura 2: Arnardalur*, performed by Ilana Waniuk and Cheryl Duvall, the directors of Thin Edge New Music Collective, on 6 September 2018 in Tokyo.

## **Conclusion**

My return trip from Ísafjörður to Reykjavík on 7 April 2018 was, in contrast to the balmy vernal journey three weeks previous, dangerously snowy and icy. There were far fewer cars on the road, and the drive itself took twice as long. Weather, in Iceland as everywhere else on the planet, is becoming even less predictable than the past, and, as per both Buddhist doctrine and scientific consensus, the only thing we can be sure of for the future is further change.

Looking at the past through its cultural artefacts – its literature, paintings, and music – and trying our hardest to hear the sounds of the past helps us understand how our world changes, and, even more so, how peoples' perceptions of the world change. Shunzei's *utamakura* theory uses poetry to enhance our perceptions in the present; Takahashi uses *utamakura* to re-enchant a disenchanted landscape. With my *utamakura* series, I hope to accomplish both of those goals, while also drawing attention not just to the unavoidable natural processes of arising and subsiding but also to the changes that humanity has imposed on nature.



Figure 4. Takashi-no-hama (meaning Takashi shore), a traditional utamakura site associated with pines, wind, and waves, is now in the Osaka suburbs and has been hemmed in by an industrialised artificial island, though some token pines have been preserved (2 March 2017). Photo: Daryl Jamieson.

Iceland now is largely treeless, but it had been well forested until the settlers cut them down in the first centuries of the Age of Settlement (Loftsson 1993, 453). Japanese *utamakura* sites, often championed in poetry for their natural beauty and pristine spiritual power, are as often as not now concreted over or otherwise urbanized – in other words, disenchanting, the *kami* forced to move on. If in my series I mostly focus on natural sounds and close-up views of delicate flowers pushing through snow or pavement, it is to find echoes of the environments that once were in the environments that exist now. In contrast to a lot of modern saga adaptations – which tend to focus on the violence of the pre-Christian, honour-code society (whether to revel in it or critique it) – I wanted to seek out the delicate, the beautiful, and the spiritual – the animist or pagan view of an enchanted, holy nature; I came in search of Icelandic *kami*. In both *utamakura 2: Arnardalur* and my work to come (including future pieces utilizing the extensive video footage and audio recordings related to places in *Gísli saga Súrssonar* I made), I hope I succeed in communicating this feeling to the audience.

Humanity has a great wealth of intellectual, spiritual, philosophical, and artistic resources for understanding the landscape and our place in it. While there is merit in focusing on the traditional ways the people of a particular landscape have developed in response to centuries of living there, culture and tradition, like all things, are ephemeral and constantly changing. Each individual creates their own subtly different and unique

picture of the world in their mind; we share a conventional core reality but the details are different. All spiritual traditions have different ways of dealing with those fraying edges of reality, and *nō* is an artistic manifestation of the Japanese syncretic approach, combining Buddhist and Shintō responses to the universal ground of emptiness. The sagas – tales of a pagan society related by its Christian descendants – are one of the ways Iceland’s history is written over and through its land. Through opening our minds and our art to as many perspectives as possible – spiritual and scientific, historical and mythological, directly sensed and indirectly imagined, native and foreign – we can rediscover an appreciation of our varied (hi)stories and of nature – and participate in their mutual re-enchantment.

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