

Research Article

The Cultural Catch: Japanese Whaling Fiction and the Gender(ed) Politics of Nostalgia

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Abstract

This article reads the post-moratorium boom in historical whaling fiction against shifting debates over the legitimacy of Japanese whaling. Taking Itō Jun's *Kyōgei no umi* (2013) as example, I draw on critical heritage studies and Svetlana Boym's theory of nostalgia to show how the novel reconstructs Edo-period whaling as a morally coherent, patriarchal community built on self-sacrifice and masculine heroism. In doing so, the novel aligns with cultural-nationalist framings of whaling, enhancing its symbolic value as a marker of Japanese identity. The article thus shows how such narratives participate in the discursive work that sustains whaling in contemporary Japan.

Keywords: Japanese Whaling Literature; Historical Fiction; Heritagization; Nostalgia; Gender and Masculinity

Introduction

Standing at the bow of the ship, Jinkichi had let one side of his plain-sleeved undergarment slip off his shoulder and placed one foot on the rail as he gazed at the ocean. Behind him, Tōmyōzaki Cape jutted out into the sea like an arm. His well-defined shoulder muscles and sturdy-looking shoulder blades gleamed in the morning sun (Itō 2013: 13).

This passage from Itō Jun's historical novel *Kyōgei no umi* (The Sea of Giant Whales, 2013) constructs a strikingly visual and highly stylized image of Jinkichi, a traveling whaler who has risen to the rank of first harpooner in Taiji's whaling guild. The scene emphasizes Jinkichi's physicality, positioning him as the embodiment of masculine strength. There is a distinctly heroic quality to this moment. Jinkichi is introduced as the idealized figure of a whaler, a man at one with the sea, exuding both confidence and control. Yet, beneath this overt masculinity, the passage carries an unmistakable sensuality. The lingering focus on his exposed skin, the way his body is framed in the scene—he stands at the prow, erect and dominant—and the comparison to the landscape, the thrusting form of the cape with its phallic undertones, all serve to aestheticize him, making him a figure of admiration and, perhaps, desire. Crucially, Jinkichi is introduced through the eyes of Otomatsu, his 15-year-old protégé, whose boundless admiration for him shapes how the

reader encounters this scene. As a boy aspiring to follow in Jinkichi's footsteps, Otomatsu looks at him with awe, reverence, and perhaps an undercurrent of longing. In short, the text does not merely *describe* the harpooner Jinkichi—it presents him as a spectacle, inviting not only Otomatsu but also the reader to gaze upon him, to marvel at his presence. This glorification of the male body, its strength, endurance, and raw physical appeal, recurs throughout the novel, creating and reinforcing a nostalgic vision of whaling as a domain of heroic men.

Jinkichi's portrayal in this scene is emblematic of how whaling, over decades a rather marginal and to date virtually unexplored topic in modern Japanese literature, has been reimagined as a politically charged and culturally significant practice in recent decades. From the 1990s onward, amidst heightened international criticism of Japan's scientific whaling program, fictional literature has increasingly engaged with whaling as a national symbol, framing it as a deeply rooted cultural tradition. This shift is reflected not only in the content of these texts but in the genre itself, historical novels set in Edo-period whaling communities. In this paper, I argue that this literature contributes to the broader cultural revalorization of Japanese whaling seen in other arenas. By examining the gendered representations of whaling heroes like Jinkichi, I show how contemporary historical fiction mythologizes the past. Beyond romanticizing the direct man-whale encounter—largely absent from modern-day industrial whaling—these novels construct an image of whaling as a culturally meaningful practice that

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fosters social cohesion, mutual trust, and collective effort. In doing so, they help legitimize whaling's central place in Japan's national imagination and shape its symbolic function in contemporary discourse.

Before turning to the literary history of whaling in modern Japanese fiction and then to a close reading of *Kyogei no umi*, I first outline how whaling has been represented, justified, and contested in public rhetoric, focusing in particular on how the culturalization and, later, heritagization of Japanese whaling are entangled with contemporary debates over state sovereignty and national identity, international pressure, and the politics of historical memory. Following critical scholarship (e.g., Abel 2005; Ishii and Sanada 2015; Arch 2018), I treat the idea of a distinct national Japanese whaling culture not as evidence of long-standing material or cultural continuity, but as a discursive construction that elevates historically localized practices to the status of national tradition by selectively emphasizing certain aspects of whaling history while downplaying others, thus producing a sense of continuity that is both politically expedient and historically tenuous.

This selective framing is also evident in the literary representations of whaling. In analyzing *Kyogei no umi*, I turn to Svetlana Boym's theory of nostalgia to explore how these constructions of heritage are refracted through fiction, particularly in creating emotional engagement with the past and its nostalgic reconstruction. Focusing on representational patterns, including their conspicuous blanks and omissions, I highlight how Itō's novel reinforces the connection between whaling and strength that is so prevalent in extra-literary discourse, thereby reinforcing the existing construction of whaling as a masculine, national tradition. Ultimately, my analysis illustrates how historical whaling fiction both resonates with and rearticulates the discourse that frames whaling as much more than a purely economic practice.

From industry to heritage

"There is," writes Laurajane Smith provocatively, "really, no such thing as heritage" (Smith 2006: 11). Heritage, she argues, is not an inherent quality but the outcome of present-day meaning-making: acts of commemoration, preservation, and institutional framing that determine what is remembered and how it is valued. Rodney Harrison likewise emphasizes that processes of heritagization often emerge in response to perceived threats, whether material loss of sites and practices or the erosion of their cultural significance (Harrison 2013: 7). In this sense, heritage constitutes a form of present-day "creative engagement" (Harrison 2013: 4) with the past, a curatorial practice through which "heritage objects, sites, places or institutions like museums become cultural tools or props" (Smith 2006: 4). What appears as continuity or authenticity, then, is less a given than a negotiated claim, articulated under specific historical conditions.

In contemporary Japanese political and cultural discourse, whaling is frequently framed as national heritage and long-standing tradition. Yet both this framing and the rhetorical

spotlight put on premodern whaling practices, such as those described in *Kyogei no umi*, are relatively recent. For much of the twentieth century, whaling was organized and justified primarily as an industrial enterprise rather than a marker of cultural identity. When modern offshore whaling, characterized by the use of steamships and grenade harpoons, and eventually factory ships, replaced earlier shore-based methods at the end of the nineteenth century, a large whaling fleet functioned as a visible marker of technological modernity. It signaled industrial capability and national ambition in an era defined by imperial expansion and global rivalry. Japan, positioning itself as a leading Asian power, was deeply involved in this development, establishing whaling stations even in areas where hunting whales had previously been a cultural taboo (Holm 2023). In other words, whaling was explicitly *dissociated* from tradition—then equated with backwardness—and aligned instead with progress and successful modernization. Competition between nation-states was central, leading to an increasingly intense and ecologically unsustainable regime of extraction now often described as the "whaling Olympics" (Epstein 2008: 46–50).

During the severe food shortages in the aftermath of the Pacific War, the American occupation authorities promoted the reconstruction of the devastated whaling fleet as a practical solution to the problem. For the first time, whale meat became a staple across Japan, accounting by 1947 for almost half of the country's total animal protein intake (Abel 2005: 325). Consumption peaked in 1962 and steadily declined thereafter as economic growth led to a diversification of diets (Suisanchō 2025: 28). Whaling remains economically marginal and largely absent from everyday life today: in 2023, whale accounted for 0.045% of the meat eaten in Japan, about 0.1 g per person, underscoring the gap between symbolic prominence and everyday practice (Nōrinsuisanshō 2025).

The language of "Japanese (culinary) culture" as a justification for whaling and whale meat consumption emerged only in the late 1970s. As environmental movements gained momentum in North America during the late 1960s and 1970s, whales were increasingly redefined not as marine resources but as exceptional, sentient beings—a shift Arne Kalland (2009) has described as the rise of the morally charged "superwhale," a figure that flattens biological diversity and historical specificity. As anti-whaling sentiment consolidated around this symbolic construction, whaling came to signify cruelty and environmental destruction (Epstein 2008: 89–115). In the wake of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, calls for a commercial whaling moratorium intensified, compelling states that continued to defend the practice, including Japan, to develop new justificatory frameworks.

In this context, the Japanese Whaling Association commissioned a public relations agency to rethink its public messaging. With whale meat consumption already in decline, nutritional and economic arguments alone proved insufficient, and previously uncommon terms, such as *kujira bunka* (whale culture), *hogeji bunka* (whaling culture), and *geishoku bunka* (whale eating culture), were actively promoted as cultural descriptors, despite lacking much prior circulation

as inherited self-designations (Ishii and Sanada 2015: 15–41).¹ Domestically, this new framing can be traced back to 1979 (Ishii and Sanada 2015: 32), and by 1986, appeals to whaling as an ancient Japanese tradition had entered international diplomacy (Epstein 2008: 227). With the introduction of “culture” and “tradition,” the debate shifted from economic calculations and food security issues to far more emotionally charged questions of identity, continuity, and respect for culinary diversity. As Chris Burgess notes, Japanese whaling was elevated to a “key marker of Japaneseness” (2016: 1).

The invocation of tradition, however, rests on contested claims of a long and uninterrupted history. Critical scholars have pointed out that “comparisons between modern practices and early modern ones are far more likely to find differences than continuities. [...] the techniques, equipment, location, and people involved have all changed so much that referring to both practices as Japan’s whaling tradition is misleading” (Arch 2018: 6). Advocates, by contrast, seize on circumstantial evidence of prehistoric whale hunting or even mythological first emperor Jinmu’s taste for whale meat (Koizumi 2010: 19–22). This debate raises a familiar Thersian problem: if practices change substantially over time, what remains constant enough to sustain claims of historical continuity? In this debate, “tradition” functions less as an empirical descriptor than as an affective and political resource, producing a sense of belonging, drawing outside boundaries, and almost by default implying worthiness of protection.

The cultural-nationalist emotionalization made scientific legitimacy a particularly compatible complementary element. After the International Whaling Commission’s (IWC) moratorium on commercial whaling came into effect in 1986, Antarctic whaling continued under the rubric of research. Led by the semi-governmental Cetacean Research Institute, the mission was tasked with providing a scientific basis for the future resumption of whaling.² The strong emphasis on scientific authority endowed the cultural argument with data-based legitimacy (Wakamatsu 2013). Scientific expertise itself thus became an additional cultural resource.

Since the early 2000s, this cultural framing has increasingly been institutionalized in what Rots describes as a strategic turn toward “whaling heritage.” As international anti-whaling campaigns waned, he argues, the cultural-nationalist thrust of earlier anti-whaling narratives grew less persuasive. Instead, pro-whaling actors shifted to framing whaling as intangible cultural heritage worth preserving and promoting (Rots 2025: 2).³ Whaling’s repeated

rebranding—first as cultural identity, then as institutionalized heritage—thus serves multiple aims: justifying Japan’s whaling practices in a globalized world, resisting foreign pressure, reconnecting with a romanticized past, and leveraging cultural assets for local economic revitalization. Against this background, I read historical whaling fiction not simply as mirroring heritage discourse but as participating in its narrative articulation. While not heritage in any institutional sense, such literature helps normalize the conditions under which whaling is reimagined as a national tradition by rendering admiration for self-sacrifice, comfort in hierarchy, and longing for cohesion as natural responses to “tradition.”

Whale tales: Whaling in modern Japanese literature

Given the post-moratorium framing of whaling as symbolizing “national pride, identity, and the Japanese race itself” (Burgess 2016: 2), one might expect it to have been a prominent theme in modern literature. However, the historical record tells a different story, one that aligns more closely with the view of whaling culture as a relatively recent and reactive construction, as outlined above. A survey of the NDL’s listings of whale- and whaling-related fictional literature since the 1880s, arguably the beginning of modern literature, reveals that for decades, whaling was neither particularly prominent nor politically charged as a literary theme. Around the turn of the twentieth century, whales were a popular ingredient in maritime adventure (*kaiyō bōken*) short stories. Mystery and science fiction also occasionally incorporated whale-related elements. While it is unclear how many of these early texts engage directly with whaling as an economic or cultural practice, their titles and classifications suggest that the whale hunt itself was rarely positioned as a central theme.

Even during the postwar years when the Japanese whaling industry reached its peak, making whale meat a ubiquitous presence, there was no corresponding surge in novelistic output. In fact, the overall number of literary publications dealing with whaling remained low throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and the few texts that engaged with it did so without strong culturalist undertones. *Kujira kōsen* (The Whale Cannery Ship, 1959) by Mamiya Mosuke (b. 1899), for instance, is explicitly modeled on the proletarian classic *Kani kōsen* (The Crab Cannery Ship, 1929) by Kobayashi Takiji (1903–33), offering a critique of exploitative labor conditions on whaling vessels rather than an exploration of whaling as a cultural tradition. Similarly, the Akutagawa-Prize-winning *Kujiragami* (Whale God, 1961) by Uno Kōichirō (1934–2024) is a loose adaptation of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), situating it within a lineage of global literary influences rather than within a specifically Japanese whaling culture discourse.

A significant shift in the literary representation of whales occurred from the 1980s onward. More precisely, two opposing trends emerge around the time of the IWC

¹ While Ishii and Sanada draw on newspaper databases and Diet proceedings, a similar pattern is visible in bibliographic data from the Japanese National Diet Library (NDL) catalogue. A catalogue-based ngram search for *hogei bunka*, *kujira bunka*, shows a marked increase in usage—and, in the case of *geishoku bunka*, first-time emergence—during the 1980s, underscoring the rise of “culture” as a new legitimizing frame.

² The heavy reliance on lethal research methods and the domestic sale of whale meat as a research “byproduct” attracted international criticism (Burgess 2016: 7–9). In 2014, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that the program did not meet the criteria for scientific research under the International Convention on the Regulation of Whaling and ordered its cessation (Ishii and Sanada 2015; Côté and Favaro 2016). Japan ended the program in 2019, resuming commercial whaling in Japanese territorial waters, outside IWC jurisdiction.

³ The 2016 recognition of Taiji whaling as Japan Heritage (*Nihon isan*) provides a prominent example (Agency for Cultural Affairs, n.d.; Wikipedia 2025, “Nihon isan”). Launched in 2015 by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Japan Heritage offers a national framework for promoting regional “stories” as cultural assets linked to identity and tourism.

moratorium. On the one hand, in short stories and children's literature, the practice of hunting whales gradually disappeared as a theme. Instead, whales increasingly appeared in metaphorical or humanized roles. While early twentieth-century children's books usually portrayed actual whales in their natural environments, they were now reimagined as protagonists in their own right—wise, gentle, and overall, highly anthropomorphized creatures that bear little resemblance to the wild animals of previous narratives. This suggests that, despite Japan's increasing isolation as a country that continued whaling against the global trajectory, much of its literary production was in line with the worldwide revaluation of cetaceans as not merely endangered but highly intelligent, more-than-animal beings.

Simultaneously, however, *whale hunting*—the primary focus of this article—gains increasing prominence as a literary topic from the 1990s onwards. This is not the result of top-down institutional support but rather reflects broader discursive transformations following the moratorium, which, as explained, prompted a reframing of an industrial practice as an ancient cultural tradition. That literature plays a role in naturalizing and legitimizing nationalist narratives that emphasize historical continuity becomes particularly evident in the generic transition that accompanied the quantitative increase in whaling-themed publications: from the turn of the century, historical novels set in premodern Japan became the dominant narrative mode for engaging with whaling.

An early example is *Enrai to dotō to* (Distant Thunder and Raging Waves, 1982) by Yugō Masakazu (1931–1988), a dramatic portrait of Edo-period whaling in Chōshū in today's Yamaguchi Prefecture. Set in the transition period from traditional to modern whaling, Nishimura Bō's (1926–2022) *Hazashi no machi* (The Town of Harpooners, 1988) describes a deadly conflict between Taiji whalers. *Kujiragami: Fukasawa Gidayu ibun* (Whale God: The Curious Tale of Fukasawa Gidayu, 1997) by Masunaga Takashi (b. 1945) is a “historical maritime romance” (*rekishi chōhen kaiyō roman*) whose protagonist is based on the historical figure who established whaling in the Ōmura domain in what is now Nagasaki Prefecture. Set in Shimonoseki, Shizaka Kei's *Oki no gonza* (Gonza of the Open Sea, 2015) offers another adaptation of the Moby-Dick motif, resentment directed against a specific whale. Yamamoto Ichiriki (b. 1948) has written two notable whaling-related novels set in late Edo-period Tosa, today's Kōchi Prefecture. In *Kujiragumi* (The Whaling Guild, 2009), he explores the growing political and economic rivalry between Tosa and Edo through the lens of local whaling traditions. In contrast, *Isuzu naru* (The Sound of Isuzu, 2008) follows the pilgrimage of the Muroto whaling guild to the Ise Shrine. Finally, Itō Jun (b. 1960), as prolific a writer of historical fiction as Yamamoto, is the author of *Kyogei no umi*—discussed in more detail below—and *Kujira bugen* (Fortune of the Whale, 2018). Both novels are set in Taiji, but while *Kyogei no umi* is primarily set in the Edo period, *Kujira bugen* focuses on a major whaling accident (*ōsemi nagare*) in the early Meiji period that also features in the last chapter of *Kyogei no umi*. By this time, catches had decreased significantly due to the expansion of Western whaling into Japanese waters. As a result, fewer people were entering the profession, which

prompted Taiji whalers to take greater risks. The 1878 accident, in which over 100 whalers lost their lives, dealt a fatal blow to traditional whaling in Taiji, from which it never recovered. Against this backdrop, *Kujira bugen* centers on the local whaling chief's desperate attempts to preserve the tradition by collaborating with whaling guilds across the country.

Among these titles, *Kyogei no umi* warrants closer inspection for several reasons. First published in 2013 to considerable acclaim, it received the fourth Yamada Futarō Prize and was shortlisted for the prestigious Naoki Prize the following year. Although it did not win, it was selected for the 1st High Schoolers' Naoki Prize, in which students vote for their favorite among the shortlisted works, an outcome that suggests the novel's appeal extends well beyond the historical fiction genre's typical middle-aged male readership (Hakuhodo DY Media Partners 2012). Set in Taiji, a site of major historical innovation in traditional whaling methods and today a nationally designated cultural heritage location, the novel is deeply rooted in a place that holds both historical significance and—especially since the release of the controversial activist documentary *The Cove* (2009)—contemporary political charge. The Oscar-winning film exposed the town's dolphin drive hunts to international scrutiny, prompting a massive influx of foreign anti-whaling activists. Far from ending the practice, Taiji has since morphed into a bastion of anti-anti-whaling sentiments and “a symbol against foreign pressure” (Holm 2019: 4).

While *Kyogei no umi* avoids explicit political polemics, the novel brings together many of the generic conventions and ideological undercurrents that characterize recent historical whaling fiction. As such, it offers a particularly vivid example of how literature reframes the past in nostalgic and, as I argue, implicitly nationalistic terms, making it an especially instructive case for examining the cultural and political work performed by literary representations of whaling.

Harpoons, heroes, and heritage in *Kyogei no umi*

Historical fiction occupies a peculiar space in literature, wedged between fact and imagination, enriching historical events with emotional experience, thus filling “the spaces scholars have no idea about—the gaps between verifiable facts” (de Groot 2009: 217). While the genre (cl)aims to adhere to historical truths, it remains a form of artful mimicry, involving a selective and subjective reconstruction of history shaped by the author's perspective, present-day concerns, and artistic interpretation. Jerome de Groot points out that the use of paratexts such as prefaces, afterwords, footnotes, glossaries, and most commonly, bibliographies serves to reinforce the genre's inherent ambiguity (de Groot 2009: 218). On one hand, these elements create the illusion of authenticity, suggesting rigorous historical grounding; on the other, they expose the narrative as a selective synthesis of sources, subtly reminding the reader that it is a fictional reconstruction, not a factual report.

While de Groot discusses novels that creatively explore this tension, often questioning simplistic understandings of history and memory, *Kyogei no umi* presents no such moments

of doubt or uncertainty in its narrative tone. Instead, the narration assumes a strongly didactic function. While the dialogues, written in the local dialect, create a sense of immersion, the diegetic sections contain a wealth of information about different whale species and are peppered with specialized whaling jargon most readers are unlikely to be familiar with, giving them a sense of learning something new. This includes Itō's choice not to use *katakana*—the conventional script for transcribing species names—when referring to the various whales appearing in the stories. Instead, he opts for *kanji*, associated with cultural specificity and indigeneity, framing whales not merely as biological entities but as culturally embedded beings. This invites readers to view whaling as traditional knowledge while also learning and appreciating the *kanji* rendition as cultural heritage. Similarly, the stories contain detailed explanations of various hunting techniques—especially the use of large nets to slow whales before harpooning them, which was famously invented in Taiji in 1675—and the social organization of the whalers, with the narrative voice occasionally interrupting the flow to add further facts and context. Complemented by an extensive bibliography, the credibility of the descriptions is further enhanced through a note of thanks for the research support provided by the curator of the Taiji historical archives. In this way, the novel's confident portrayal of historical events, together with its bibliographical paratexts, strengthens the illusion of factual accuracy and authenticity, even though it remains a work of fiction.

Masculinizing memory

What, then, are the concerns and themes that *Kyogei no umi* engages with? To understand the novel's place within the discursive reimagining of whaling in Japan, it is essential to examine both the selectivity and the gendered nature of its representation. The book consists of six stand-alone chapters, originally published as short stories in *Shōsetsu Hōseki*, a magazine specializing in entertainment fiction. While the first four stories are set in the Edo period, the final two chapters are set at the dawn of the Meiji period, marking the twilight of traditional whaling in Taiji.

The all-male protagonists are of diverse backgrounds, each navigating moral, physical, and social challenges. In the opening chapter, Jinkichi, the traveling harpooner portrayed in the introduction of this article, nearly loses his life due to a young harpooner's reckless disobedience. When this almost results in the latter's expulsion from Taiji, Jinkichi intervenes, advocating for the man's pardon before quietly leaving town to avoid further conflict. In chapter 2, Suekichi, an apprentice whaler, steals ambergris to support his ailing mother, an offense for which he ultimately atones by sacrificing his life to save the crew during a dangerous encounter with a mother whale. Chapter 3 centers on Kiheiji, an intellectually disabled but highly skilled young scrimshaw artist who displays extraordinary courage by saving his friends while adrift at sea. Yet despite his heroism, he is confined to less prestigious shore labor due to entrenched prejudice and remains socially marginalized. Seeking to reclaim dignity and agency, Kiheiji kills a man whose lawless

behavior has been harming the community, deliberately leaving evidence and accepting execution. In the fourth chapter, Shinkichi, an undercover police agent from the district capital of Shingū, investigates the murder of a traveling prostitute. When discovering the killer—a harpooner who satisfied his violent impulses by killing women during periods without catches—he agrees to conceal the crime, allowing the man to die by suicide to save his family from disgrace. Chapter 5 follows Daizō, a teenager repulsed by the violence of the whale hunt and the gore of the processing work. When his older brother, the family's primary provider, is paralyzed in an accident while saving the crew, Daizō must choose between entering monastic life or confronting his aversion to whaling. He ultimately opts for the latter, “manning up” by stepping into his brother's place, physically and symbolically, by entering an apprenticeship as a harpooner and marrying his fiancée. Finally, the last chapter recounts the above-mentioned *ōsemi nagare*, the 1878 accident that ended traditional Taiji whaling. Narrated from the perspective of two apprentice whalers—Taiji-born Yasōhei and Tsunekichi, a physically weak and mentally unfit boy from Edo—the chapter culminates in Tsunekichi's unexpected transformation, as he saves his companions from certain death.

Together, the six chapters construct an image of premodern Taiji as a patriarchal and rigidly hierarchical, communally oriented society. Despite the apparent diversity of perspectives, the action invariably climaxes at sea, suggesting that “whaling” is defined by the experience of the *okiaishū*, the whalers directly involved in the hunt. Other, equally important but more mundane aspects, such as the flensing and processing of whale parts, the production and maintenance of whaling gear, the sale of whale products, and whale-related religious practices, are either minimized or entirely omitted. Even the consumption of whale meat—central to contemporary conceptualizations of whaling culture—is only hinted at. What emerges are tales of narrowly defined “heroic masculinity” in which self-sacrifice as a path to redemption or social reintegration is a recurrent motif: characters such as Suekichi, Kiheiji, and Tsunekichi, socially excluded as deviants, disabled men, or outsiders, ultimately assert moral agency through acts that risk or cost them their lives for the sake of the group. The importance of group stability is also apparent in Jinkichi and Shinkichi's decisions to prioritize group harmony over formal punishment, revealing a cultural logic in which the maintenance of social peace overrides abstract legal or moral absolutes. Finally, Daizō's coming-of-age narrative suggests that the dismissal of individual sensitivities and adherence to collectivist norms is a necessary step to maturity, here defined as the acceptance of labor, inherited responsibility, and heteronormative duty.

While the perspective of young boys is explored in several chapters, female characters—as well as activities tied to the domestic sphere that might include the preparation and consumption of whale—are nearly absent from the narrative. The few women who appear are represented through the male gaze and, devoid of any agency or even a voice of their own, serve merely as silent props for male character

development, whether as dependents (Suekichi's sickly mother), symbols of duty (Daizō's brother's fiancée), or victims (the murdered prostitute). Although historically, the actual whale hunt was indeed a male-dominated activity, the novel's erasure of both women and non-heroic male labor reflects narrative choice rather than historical inevitability. The limited focus also stands in stark contrast to earlier fiction written when whaling remained very much part of everyday life. For example, *Kujira no machi* (The Town of Whales), published in 1943⁴ by Kajino Tokuzō (1901–1984), offers a more comprehensive realist portrayal of contemporary whaling that includes processing scenes and references to women's active involvement in it (Kajino 1943: 53–57). Reflecting contemporary notions of whaling as a symbol of technological modernity, progress, national pride, and international competition, Kajino's novel is forward-facing and embedded in the industrial present. By contrast, *Kyogei no umi*, written decades after whale meat disappeared from daily experience, uses whaling primarily as a symbolic setting rather than as a lived practice, recasting Taiji as a site of moral testing in which redemption is attainable but contingent upon personal sacrifice, submission to social order, and the performance of culturally sanctioned masculinity.

Mobilizing nostalgia

Life in premodern whaling communities as portrayed in *Kyogei no umi* is harsh and unforgiving, marked by rigid hierarchies, physical danger, and the constant threat of death, hunger, and social exclusion. At first glance, there seems little here to inspire nostalgia aside, perhaps, from the book's cover, which features Utagawa Kuniyoshi's iconic ukiyo-e depicting the legendary swordsman Miyamoto Musashi poised to slay a giant whale, blending martial heroism with Edo-period fantasy. Yet when we turn from this image to the story itself and situate it in the context of Japan's socio-political landscape at the time of publication, the novel's evocation of communal structure and moral clarity takes on a new resonance.

Kyogei no umi appeared in 2013, at a moment when Japan was grappling with deep social, economic, and political uncertainty. The 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster triggered national trauma and a wave of institutional distrust (Hommerich 2012), highlighting growing social fragmentation. Buzzwords like *kizuna* (social bonds), *kodokushi* (lonely death), and *muen shakai* (a society without ties) reflect the alienation and weakening cohesion in an economy mired in stagnation. The post-bubble downturn persisted beyond the "lost decade," with a growing consciousness of social inequality (*kakusa shakai*) challenging the myth of an egalitarian, middle-class society.

These anxieties were also articulated in gendered and generational terms. While precarious part-time work had long been normalized for women, the increase in the number of young men working as *freeters* outside the regular workforce, as well as the unbroken trend towards late

marriage (*bankonka*), provoked a moral panic about shifting gender roles and the erosion of the traditional family model. Then-Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare Yanagisawa Hakuo's 2007 description of women as "birth machines" (*umu kikai*) did little to halt the ongoing demographic decline: in 2011, the Japanese population shrank for the first time, marking a symbolic turning point. The return of Abe Shinzō as Prime Minister in 2012 coincided with a steady decline in Japan's Global Gender Gap ranking—from 101 in 2012 to 119 in 2021, at the end of his tenure (World Economic Forum 2012: 9; World Economic Forum 2021: 30)—as his *Womenomics* platform and associated reforms in areas such as childcare, parental leave, and taxation failed to achieve the intended effect, leaving deeply ingrained gender expectations intact (Crawford 2021).

In parallel, the broader conservative turn of the 2010s entailed renewed emphasis on national identity and cultural tradition, including the symbolic defense of whaling. Abe's close ally, Nikai Toshihiro (b. 1939), a powerful pro-whaling politician from Wakayama Prefecture, would later play a central role in Japan's 2019 withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission and the resumption of commercial whaling in Japanese territorial waters. Meanwhile, the nationalist "anti-anti-whaling" backlash to the above-mentioned activist documentary *The Cove*, which exposed the Taiji dolphin drive and its controversial methods, had intensified public debate around the time of *Kyogei no umi*'s publication.

In this context of uncertainty and declining faith in collective futures, the vision of premodern whaling life presented in *Kyogei no umi* contributes to a sense of nostalgia, although perhaps less for the whale hunt itself than for the values that underpin it. To unpack this tension, Svetlana Boym's distinction between *reflective* and *restorative* nostalgia proves useful. Reflective nostalgia does not seek to reconstruct the past but lingers in the awareness of its irretrievability, embracing the fragmentation and emotional complexity of memory, often with irony or melancholy. In contrast, restorative nostalgia is a more active mode of longing that seeks to return to an idealized past—an entirely ahistorical "time out of time" (Boym 2011)—treating it as a stable source of identity and truth. It believes in an authentic origin and often underpins nationalist or heritage discourses, selectively using the past to legitimize present-day agendas. Unlike reflective nostalgia, it is not self-aware; it masks the constructed nature of memory by presenting the past as whole and recoverable, projecting contemporary hopes onto a mythic past rather than an imagined future as conventional utopias would.

In *Kyogei no umi*, both restorative and reflective nostalgia are present, and at times overlap. As an expression of restorative nostalgia, the novel constructs a coherent, heroic past: whaling is shown as noble and altruistic, with little attention to its historical complexity or mundane realities. It selectively erases not only women's labor and domestic life but also sustained forms of non-hegemonic masculinity. Men who deviate from the ideal of physical courage and group loyalty are ultimately reabsorbed into the community through acts of self-sacrifice or redemption. This narrative

⁴ The novel was republished as *Umi no yajū* (The Wild Beasts of the Sea) in 1955. For a more detailed analysis of the novel and its film adaptation, see Holm (2023: 176–80).

idealization echoes the sentiment of former Japanese IWC delegate Komatsu Masayuki who described whaling as “uniting the community in work that everyone staked their lives on. It gave us [Japanese] a way to dedicate ourselves to others” (Komatsu 2011: 43). In this spirit, the novel crafts a morally idealized “golden age” of whaling—not through an absence of conflict, but through its resolution within a tightly knit social order that privileges harmony and duty. This links seamlessly to Carol Gluck’s account of Edo as the essentialist “master trope for tradition,” a symbolic space “both gone and not gone, both the world that was lost and the world that never was” (Gluck 1998: 284). In this sense, the novel’s portrayal of traditional whaling becomes less a historical setting than a time out of time: a condensed, idealized version of Japaneseness untouched by modernity.

Importantly, the erosion of this “lost world” is not external to the novel but dramatized within it. The final chapter, set in 1878 and the only one with a clear historical date, describes the encroachment of modernity as an outside force in the Meiji period. The expansion of American whaling activities into Japanese waters has led to declining catches and a labor shortage, prompting the hiring of unskilled seasonal workers from other parts of Japan, which compromised the craftsmanship and operational integrity of the Taiji whaling guild. Moreover, the influx led to more cultural and linguistic diversity, thereby producing a sense of cultural dislocation in Taiji natives, leading them to “inevitably feel uncomfortable” (Itō 2013: 272). The chapter’s culmination in the whaling accident that terminated traditional whaling in the area reinforces the idea of a lost time, marking both a literal and figurative end of an era.

The emotional resonance of this ending, marked by the influx of outsiders, the erosion of communal bonds, and the collapse of a long-standing way of life, mirrors, at the level of affect, the uncertainties of contemporary Japan. While the novel’s nostalgic reconstruction of the past aligns with restorative nostalgia, this final chapter introduces a reflective undercurrent. The loss it depicts is not framed as avoidable but as the irreversible passing of a world. This temporal rupture, and the quiet grief that accompanies it, invites readers not to “recover” that past, but to mourn it, a mood encapsulated in the resigned acknowledgment that “it’s all ‘civilization and enlightenment’ now, can’t be helped” (Itō 2013: 272). In this way, the novel is able to acknowledge human suffering and social exclusion not in spite of its nostalgic tone, but because its gaze is elegiac rather than triumphalist. The world it depicts is already lost, and no character or narrative voice proposes its literal return. What is longed for, then, is not the whale hunt itself, but the emotional and moral architecture that structured it: a sense of purpose, solidarity, and collective belonging. In this way, *Kyogei no umi* exemplifies reflective nostalgia’s capacity to find meaning in the past without idealizing or reviving its material form.

Conclusion: The narrative labor of nostalgia

Historical whaling novels like *Kyogei no umi* do more than narrate the past. They aestheticize it, moralize it, and make it feel familiar. While not overtly political, the novel both

contributes to and draws on the ongoing heritagization of whaling. By framing whaling as a historical practice and a cultural legacy, it offers a narrative of unity and group identity that renders admiration for hierarchy, self-sacrifice, and communal obligation emotionally compelling. Through its nostalgic romanticization of premodern whaling communities as moral touchstones and symbols of national pride, Itō’s text transforms historically localized practices into a symbolic scene of tradition. By elevating male labor into cultural legacy, the stories provide reassurance through depictions of strength, sacrifice, and social cohesion. At the center of this imaginative reconstruction, hypermasculine figures, such as Jinkichi and the other harpooners, emerge as stylized objects of admiration and desire, functioning as mythologized tradition bearers and model exemplars. In this way, *Kyogei no umi* resonates with the dominant discourse surrounding whaling, linking the practice to national identity and pride while offering an aesthetically appealing justification of it as culturally relevant. The novel thus reflects a broader conservative impulse to reassert national identity amid the uncertainties of globalization and social change. The past it constructs does not simply commemorate whaling; it seeks to recapture a sense of cultural coherence. What the novel ultimately “archives,” then, is not whaling writ large but a narrowed, spectacularized seascape of heroic male labor made to stand in for tradition as such.

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