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When the Oxygen Mask Becomes Excess: The Ethics of Cultural Preservation and *Haenyeo Kitchen's* Food Ecology

Minu Park

This article examines the ethical tensions of cultural preservation through Haenyeo Kitchen, an immersive dining performance centered on Jeju's haenyeo, or "sea women." While UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage designation has amplified global interest in haenyeo, their profession—rooted in ecological knowledge and extreme bodily risk—faces romanticization and commodification. Haenyeo Kitchen foregrounds the interwoven dynamics of mortality, embodied labor, and communal exchange, positioning food as a medium that facilitates both witnessing and participation. The performance generates an affective explosion, transforming the space into one of heightened emotional and sensory engagement. Drawing on Diana Taylor's critique of archiving live practices, this article argues that resisting the fixation of cultural heritage requires engaging with its living conditions, including its economic realities. Haenyeo Kitchen enacts this through collective affect, participation, and direct interaction, sustaining haenyeo as cultural and economic agents.

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Haenyeo, or “sea women,” are divers who harvest marine products in the sea without oxygen masks, a practice specific to Jeju, an island located to the south of the Korean peninsula.¹ Their history traces back centuries, with the practice documented as early as 503 CE, though the precise origin and period of emergence remain unclear. They have remained in the Korean consciousness without particular recognition or attention as a cultural heritage in need of preservation or as a subject of salvage (Jeong 2024). However, this perception has drastically changed with the *haenyeo*’s registration in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) status in 2016—an organization that recognizes and supports the heritage value of tangible and intangible cultural heritages worldwide. With Jeju’s rise as a desirable tourist destination before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, *haenyeo* culture and practice have become an exciting tourist attraction that presents unique memories and experiences to visitors (Rahman 2021; Park, Chung, and Lee 2020).²

Following the UNESCO ICH designation, *haenyeo* have gained both popular and academic attention in recent years (Hua et al. 2021; Kim 2015). In line with the significant factors for its ICH designation, including the indigenous wisdom of human coexistence with nature and the uniqueness of a women-led working system, studies have focused on understanding *haenyeo* from an ecofeminist perspective, exploring the gender, labor, and environmental aspects of this profession. These studies acknowledge women’s power to form a working collective, sustain families and children during extreme poverty, and do so while remaining environmentally conscious (Lee and Myong 2018).³ Although they have effectively analyzed *haenyeo*’s value and the urgency of recognition before it is too late (as the *haenyeo* are nearing “extinction”), they have not sufficiently addressed the ethical questions of valorizing this lethal profession under the equally dubious practice of “cultural preservation.” This practice is enacted and perpetuated by colonial-modern global politics, which rely on a division between the premodern and the modern, with the “premodern” assigned archival value, fixating it on the past as something either dying or already gone. This project takes a performance-centered approach to challenge this perspective, examining *haenyeo*’s significance through their unique relationship to death and its connection to healing and rebirth. It interrogates the colonial-modern savior narrative associated with cultural preservation, which operates on the principle of life affirmation.

This article examines the complex ethics of cultural preservation when the lives of cultural knowledge bearers are at stake. Through an analysis of *Haenyeo Kitchen*, an immersive dining performance on

Jeju Island, I explore how food serves as a conduit for engaging with the *haenyeo*, whose livelihoods and embodied knowledge are deeply tied to the sea. Specifically, I ask: Why and when does the *haenyeo*'s proximity to death cease to be solely a tragedy and instead acquire a respected and appreciative quality? How does food mediate this shift in perception? To address these questions, I argue that *Haenyeo Kitchen* foregrounds the food cycle, incorporating eating as an essential component that allows participants to embody the futuristic and healing potential embedded in the *haenyeo*'s precarious underwater work. Drawing from Diana Taylor's study on the impossibility of retaining the "liveness" of repertoire through archiving—particularly in light of UNESCO's structural limitations in supporting ICH—I illuminate the challenges of sustaining embodied practices associated with living subjects. I highlight how *Haenyeo Kitchen* facilitates ecological and economic ecosystems by fostering physical and emotional intimacy through its immersive, food-centered structure, arguing that these enactments function as a collective "oxygen mask" for the *haenyeo*. In this article, I approach healing not as a measurable outcome through audience or performer testimonials, but as an ongoing process that unfolds through embodied engagement. *Haenyeo Kitchen* facilitates a form of situated witnessing, where audiences become entangled in the interconnected cycles of death, labor, and sustenance. Rather than offering a resolution, the performance invites open-ended possibilities for meaning-making, allowing healing to emerge in ways that are relational and experiential—through the very act of eating, listening, and participating.

Haenyeo Kitchen: An Immersive Dining Experience in Four Parts

Among the multitude of tourist attractions offered in Jeju, *Haenyeo Kitchen* stands out as a notable case of a creative business model that features performance as its significant element. It combines immersive theatre with fine dining through the concept of *haenyeo* tourism. Established in 2019, *Haenyeo Kitchen* has since opened a second branch and developed two distinct immersive performance repertoires, demonstrating its successful business expansion even in the face of the pandemic. The primary repertoire lasts approximately two and a half hours, consisting of two parts, each further divided into two sections. It starts with a brief performance featuring the traumatic life stories of *haenyeo*, followed by a short informational session on the marine products collected by *haenyeo*, then a buffet of distinct Jeju cuisines

prepared by *haenyeo*, concluding with a Q&A session with the region's oldest *haenyeo*.

The performance space is a refurbished fish market, abandoned for thirty years, where *haenyeos* used to sell their harvested marine products. The short performance piece that opens *Haenyeo Kitchen* conveys one of four stories in the repertoire, inspired by true accounts of participating *haenyeos*. These stories are imbued with the trauma-laden nature of their profession. When I attended the performance in the summer of 2022, it depicted the protagonist's deep sorrow at the passing of her husband, associated with Jeju's historical trauma of the 4.3 Incident, a massacre related to the Korean War. The second part portrayed the death of her friend while working in the sea. The poignancy of the narrative concluded with possibilities of healing, which materialized when the ninety-year-old *haenyeo*, the inspiration for the story, made an appearance at the story's conclusion, facing the actor portraying her younger self.

The subsequent educational session promoted an appreciation for horn conch, or *bbulsora*, a type of sea snail that grows particularly abundant and in larger forms along the coast of Jeju. Ha-won Kim, the producer and actor of *Haenyeo Kitchen*, facilitated the session with gaiety and wit, assisting the *haenyeo* who provided the information. Kim encouraged the audience to admire the distinctly jagged and spiky shape of the horn conch, which the snail developed to endure the particularly strong tidal current of the Jeju coast. During this session, the *haenyeo* dissected a harvested horn conch, freshly caught on the day of the performance, seasoned it, and offered the dish to the audience. As she offered only one horn conch, the audience needed to compete by playing rock-scissor-papers to win the dish, and the prize went to the winner of the game (in this particular case, my mother, who accompanied me to the performance). This seamlessly transitioned into a buffet, where the rest of the audience had the opportunity to taste the horn conch themselves, alongside a diverse array of Jeju's local culinary offerings (see Fig. 1).

The final segment of the evening, the Q&A session, featured Gwon Yeong-hee, the region's eldest *haenyeo*, who had appeared in the performance. While she was unable to answer all the questions submitted by the audience in written form during the eating session, an actor facilitated the Q&A, skillfully eliciting compelling stories and insights from Yeong-hee. A significant portion of the Q&A session was dedicated to elaborating on the challenging realities of working at sea. The mediating actor improvised relevant questions and comments, expanding upon the audience's inquiries to draw out captivating



FIGURE 1. Section of the culinary offerings by Haenyeo Kitchen. From the top left are vegetables, sangwe bread, pickled onions, seasoned chwi (aster), and kimchi. From the bottom left are soybean paste, seasoned tot (fusiforme), seasoned kunso (sea hare), and dombe meat (boiled pork). The carrots are a famous regional product of Gujwa County in Jeju, sangwe bread is unique to Jeju, and kunso is a typical haenyeo catch. Dombe meat is a popular dish among Jeju visitors, as the island is noted for its black pork. Note the abundance of the food; the dish is refilled when emptied. The variety extends to roughly three times what is captured in this picture. (Photo by Minu Park)

narratives from Yeong-hee. She even showed a thin diving suit that Young-hee had worn in the past and prompted her to speak about the dolphins, which are perceived as a threat to *haenyeos* while at sea, offering a contrasting narrative to the general excitement of encountering dolphins during sightseeing.

As the performance concludes, all crew members who contributed to the performance, including the *haenyeos* who prepared the food, came out from backstage to bid farewell. Audience members were then invited to linger, explore the space, purchase products, and talk to the performance crew. I observed that families with children chose to take pictures with Yeong-hee, with the children expressing excitement at meeting a *haenyeo* in person.

UNESCO: Archiving in Preparation for Death

Ha-won Kim, *Haenyeo Kitchen*'s producer, addresses the disparity between *haenyeo*'s actual lives and their portrayal as a tourist attraction as the primary motivation behind conceiving this performance project.

Kim, a Jeju-born actor who pursued professional acting training in Seoul, remarks,

I visited Jeju in 2018 and observed an abundance of memorial halls, events, merchandise, production, and more in response to *haenyeo*'s UNESCO ICH status. However, these initiatives lacked genuine *haenyeo* representation, and the lives of *haenyeos* were not improved at all. They did not resemble the *haenyeo* I knew I decided to change this through the power of arts and culture.⁴ (Lee 2020)

Kim's description raises questions about what the "genuine" representation of *haenyeo* might be, which the UNESCO ICH status fails to promote. UNESCO, an abbreviation for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, was founded during World War II and is headquartered in Paris, France. It was established with a vision to "rebuild their [European countries, which were confronting Nazi Germany and its allies] education systems once peace was restored" ("UNESCO in brief"). Despite its educational focus and European origins, UNESCO is regarded as a proper noun in Korea, without necessarily remaining conscious of these origins. Instead, it functions as an official endorsement of universal heritage value worthy of recognition, preservation, and tourism (Engelhardt 2010: 57–58). Having grown up in a country where UNESCO is common knowledge, I was often surprised by the responses from North America, where the concept is perceived as jargon requiring explanation.

Among the various projects that UNESCO advocates for, its significance in Korea lies in the designation of tangible cultural heritage and ICH statuses to specific monuments, archives, methods, or practices. This designation provides significant economic and intellectual support for the recognition and preservation of these "heritages" and aligns with the existing practice of assigning National Treasure status to people and objects, a project carried out by the Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea. Living in a culture where UNESCO is common knowledge means living with the fact that an important part of the culture, which is currently alive, is actively dying and nearing extinction. In this context, the meaning of touring UNESCO-designated heritage sites or practices diverges from that of capitalist tourist performances, which sometimes verge on exploitation and consumption of the target culture. UNESCO visualizes the urgency of transgenerational meeting and learning, inviting descendants to form active relationships with the histories with which the embodied connections are rapidly fading.

However, a pitfall exists in the protocols for protecting and preserving intangible cultural heritage. Current policy places emphasis on the techniques of the practice, devoid of the fluctuating energies of

the liveness that the practitioner and their environment enact. Diana Taylor interprets this tendency as the appropriation of “repertoire” in the language of “archive” and cautions against confusing the actual, live repertoire with the archive-rendered one. Taylor’s analysis in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), in which she distinguishes two significant forms of cultural heritage, using the terms “archive” and “repertoire,” closely corresponds to the distinction between tangible and intangible heritage. Taylor’s project aims to provide a lens through which performance can be understood on its own terms, as a “repertoire” or an embodied practice, rather than through the language of the “archive,” which is considered more static in its form. In “Saving the ‘Live’? Re-performance and Intangible Cultural Heritage” (2016), Taylor examines the tendency of repertoire’s quick relegation into the archive, which she noticed while writing a manual for UNESCO’s ICH-related event. Taylor writes, “‘Safeguarding’ culture, and leaving political, economic, and intellectual property discussions off the table, one might argue, in and of itself does violence to the practices UNESCO seeks to protect” (Taylor 2016: 153). In essence, Taylor points out that, although the repertoire is classified as intangible heritage, UNESCO prioritizes conventional preservation methods used for tangible heritage, such as documentation and recording, which poses limits to its approaches to intangible heritage.

Enacting Ecosystems of Death through Dining

To combat the assimilation of the repertoire into a set of archives, Taylor suggests starting with recognizing the “environment or meaning-making framework” in deciding granting factors of ICH status (Ibid.). Taylor’s point that this is necessary so that “cultures could more easily defend and preserve the practices meaningful for them” gives agents with embodied knowledge a central role in conceiving ICH, bringing the focal point to the living subjects. Indeed, *Haenyeo Kitchen*’s revitalization of the abandoned fish market, through *haenyeo*’s reclaiming of the space, initiates healing for both *haenyeos* and the local community by allowing them to continue their engagement with their own environment (Won 2020). However, while Taylor presents a desirable direction for further considerations that should be made by ICH, I wonder if it is ever possible to sustain living, or liveness, through a set of protocols. Rather than prolonging life, embracing death could serve as one central avenue through which contemporary engagement with repertoire may obtain significance. It is in this context that I perceive *Haenyeo Kitchen* as an effective case of revitalizing the repertoire. I interpret it both as a performance that centers on the

bearers of cultural knowledge and as one that highlights death as an essential part of the *haenyeo*'s profession, fostering active participation in the life-death cycle of preparing and consuming food.

The UNESCO description defines *haenyeo* as “a community of women, some aged in their 80s, which goes diving 10m under the sea to gather shellfish, such as abalone or sea urchins for a living without the help of oxygen masks” (emphasis added) (UNESCO 2016). As evident in this description, “without the help of oxygen masks” is central to *haenyeo*'s identity and undoubtedly a key factor in its recognition as an ICH. In the language employed by UNESCO on *haenyeo* culture, the significance of not adopting an oxygen mask lies in the spirit of co-existence (UNESCO 2016; Kim 2023). Due to the limited time spent in each dive, corresponding to the duration one can endure while holding their breath, the most important philosophy of the profession is to let go of greed and excess. One moment of succumbing to the desire for a greater harvest may result in swift death. Moreover, the *haenyeo* community adheres to a strict principle of harvesting only fully grown marine products while releasing the younger ones to allow further growth. There is also a directive prohibiting the collection of certain species during specific periods to respect their dormant and growing phases (UNESCO 2023).

While these descriptions provide a beautiful utopian model of indigenous wisdom and human coexistence with nature, they seem rather insufficient to explain the continued choice not to adopt an oxygen mask. *Haenyeos* have embraced other technological advancements that make their work more efficient, exemplified by their incorporation of rubber wetsuits that keep the body warm during winter months (Ibid.). Thus, their resistance to using oxygen masks is often immediately translated to outsiders as a morally dubious postcolonial practice of “preserving” the “premodern” shortcomings that put human life at the front line for the sake of modern tourist attraction—especially when a seemingly innocuous, life-affirming gear such as an oxygen mask is available.

Against this backdrop, *Haenyeo Kitchen* takes a different approach, one that embraces rather than avoids death. It enacts multiple levels of collective “oxygen masks” (if the oxygen mask can be a metaphor for “enlivening” *haenyeo*) instead of making endeavors to place more distance between *haenyeo* and death. It intertwines *haenyeo*'s precarity with the life-death cycle of food, where death functions to engender life, just as how life engenders death. It demonstrates the reality that, at its core, food is about producing death in its role of prolonging and replenishing life energy for another. For example, the horn conch education portion of the performance, which takes place right before the eating session,

stages fresh death as the pinnacle of performance, as the horn conch is dissected in front of everyone. The rock-paper-scissors game builds an exploding energy of excitement in the room as everyone enthusiastically participates. The winning visitor is treated with the best service and celebration, which is the opportunity to embody the powerful life energy that the freshly dead horn conch provides.

Furthermore, the characteristic of their work associated with food renders consumption an essential part of completing the cycle of *haenyeo*'s work. Spanning an extended running time of 140 minutes, in *Haenyeo Kitchen* the audience can immerse themselves in the space and the narrative of harvesting, learn about food preparation using the gathered materials, eat/embody them, and linger afterward, spending time with the preparer to pay respects.

Studies on *Haenyeo Kitchen* highlight its most significant strength as the creation of a unique experience that allows visitors to feel accepted on the island through shared affect, fostering a sense of community and connection (Choi 2022; Kwon 2023). *Haenyeo Kitchen* employs immersive theatre settings, making the boundaries between visitors and performers malleable.⁵ It invites the audience to share the stage space with the performers, as the entire building functions as the performing arena. With a seating capacity of less than fifty audience members per session, the space fosters intimacy and closeness among the visitors. The U-shaped table arrangement, with chairs placed on both sides, encourages dynamic engagement with the space. Audience members face different parts of the room, not knowing the prescribed viewpoints, which encourages them to choose their own perspective. The first part of the performance, where actors enact a narrative of loss and suffering integral to *haenyeo*'s identity, begins inside the U-shaped tables and progresses into the area previously concealed by a black curtain masquerading as a wall. The second and fourth parts, focused on information and learning, are led by the *haenyeo* and actors in the small opening from the surrounding tables. This location is distinct from where the first performance section occurred. In the third session, the dining experience, the audience becomes the center of the space. It takes the form of a buffet that requires participants to create their own method of moving and dining while observing and emulating the eating habits of others. During this phase, another curtain concealing a wall is revealed, exposing a window that provides a view of the sea right next to the building, imbuing liveness to the stories with the overarching presence of the sea that extends beyond what the window frame can hold (see Fig. 2).



FIGURE 2. Window with a view of the sea. Note the free movement of the body members. (Photo by Minu Park)

Haenyeo Kitchen's omnidirectional gaze and movement protocols, evolving within an intimate space imbued with *haenyeo's* history and culture both inside and outside, highlight entanglement. It facilitates participants' embodied relationship-building with *haenyeos* and their environment. While the narratives presented by *Haenyeo Kitchen* deliver stories of profound suffering, the delight of food underscores that suffering engenders more than mere despair. The immersive experience it crafts provides audience members with an opportunity for compassionate listening and understanding of these hardships, as well as the opportunity for *haenyeo* to witness the efficacy of their work through observing the audience's joyful eating. In the Q&A session, the actor explained that the *haenyeos* initially remained indifferent to the performance project, ensuring that their working hours were not interrupted by the performance schedule. However, they have since found joy and energy from the supportive audience to the point that they now prioritize the performance over their work. At this comment,

Yeong-hee, a ninety-year-old *haenyeo*, expressed heartfelt appreciation toward the audience, thanking them for allowing her to affirm the value of the profession. She shared the incredible amount of joy and liveliness this interactivity brings to her life.⁶

If the performance itself brings to the fore the immediacy of the food cycle, of harvesting, preparing, eating, and paying respects, it also illustrates a larger but still poignant ecosystem that involves more than just the living beings on earth. During the Q&A session, my question (very coincidentally) was pulled out from the box of paper slips containing audience questions, which asked about the best and worst parts of the profession. Yeong-hee answered immediately, “The best part? Getting money!” Her strong tone, almost dismissive and bordering on offended, conveyed fatigue with the potential assumptions of sanctity associated with honoring the profession. Likewise, *Haenyeo Kitchen* highlights the economic significance of the work by promoting product purchases throughout the performance, featuring goods harvested and prepared by the *haenyeos*, such as *tot* (seaweed fusiforme), cauldron *sangwe* bread, salt-fermented *bbulsora* (horn conch), *haenyeo* all-purpose paste, and *tot* black sesame porridge.⁷ Kim, the founder of *Haenyeo Kitchen*, explains outright during the horn conch informational session that the performance aims to enhance the lives of *haenyeo* by establishing a sustainable business model that offers *haenyeo* and their harvested marine products better prices than the harsh market average (Lee 2020). Yeong-hee’s response, along with Kim’s vision for *Haenyeo Kitchen*, demonstrates that the life cycle sustaining *haenyeo* lies in active participation in the economic ecosystem, which will feed back into *haenyeos*’ lives in an entangled system of giving and receiving. Through its structure and intent, *Haenyeo Kitchen* actively integrates financial sustenance as a material form of recognition and care, creating a space where economic viability and affective meaning-making work in tandem. The performance enacts healing as an ongoing process of securing futures, ensuring that the *haenyeo*’s labor is valued both materially and symbolically. In doing so, it complicates the strict distinction between tourist attraction and high-stakes performance, demonstrating how economic and cultural imperatives can converge in ways that are both commercially viable and affectively consequential.

***Memento Mori*, Futurist Healing, and Food**

In my journey of writing this article and sharing its progress with scholars unfamiliar with *haenyeo*, I have encountered an immediate, almost intuitive, discomfort with the idea of creating an enjoyable theatre experience that fosters, rather than prevents, the continuation of

such a precarious profession. Indeed, *haenyeos* carry death on their bodies. *Haenyeos'* existence itself functions as *memento mori*, as a reminder of mortality, with an in-your-face quality as they are living human beings. This recognition led me to explore the absence of such an instinctive aversion in *Haenyeo Kitchen*.

I argue that the physical and emotional intimacy fostered among all participants through the performance's immersive structure involving food enables perceiving *haenyeo's* proximity to death with futurist sensibilities. *Memento mori* evokes human equality in the face of death. Kwon Doo-hyun, Korean scholar of gender and affect, explores this enactment of intimacy and its healing possibilities through the concept of "affective economy" in "*Haenyeo Kitchen* and The Affective Economy of 'Service'" (2023). Pointing out the shared etymology of the words "ecology" and "economy," from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning home or habitat, Kwon highlights the innate connection between a *haenyeo's* life as a mother and a homemaker and her relationship to her work. Observing that "*haenyeo* can save herself and her family when she stops her breath," he interprets the first part of *Haenyeo Kitchen* as building a narrative in which becoming a *haenyeo* involves learning to "live with death" (Kwon 2023: 393, 404). Interpreting living with death as an essentially affective form of life, Kwon focuses on the healing potential of *Haenyeo Kitchen* for both the *haenyeos* and the audience members, which is achieved through staging live, moving bodies of the actors and *haenyeos* (Ibid.: 410). As evidence, Kwon cites audience reviews noting how the food tasted particularly good in this setting, suggesting that food is affectively experienced, functioning beyond mere daily sustenance (Ibid.: 416). In Kwon's analysis, *Haenyeo Kitchen* mobilizes the ecology and economy of the *haenyeo*, which entails death, by emphasizing healing that is realized through affect, compellingly brought out by incorporating eating into the performance.

Contributing to this perception of death as an agent of affective healing is the site-specificity of the performance. Y.J. Hwang has written about the stretch toward a futurist vision of Jeju Island's historical trauma, associated with the island-wide massacre by the governmental forces from 1948 to 1949, by exploring the open-ended narrative of the Jeju Peace Museum. In "'An Island of Death': *Homo Sacer* and Ungrievable Deaths" (2020), Hwang explicates the island's quality as a *memento mori*. Hwang writes, "Jeju Island is called 'a space of death' in the sense that many unknown graves, destructed villages, and memorial sites are scattered all over the island" (Hwang 2020: 564). Hwang introduces Koh Kil-chun's exhibition in the Jeju Peace Park titled "An Island of Death," which visualizes the presence of the dead

bodies on the island, whose remains continue to be found over seventy years after the Incident (Ibid.: 571–572). The traumatic history of Jeju coincides with the island’s particularly stunning natural beauty, which draws individuals from the Korean peninsula who frequently visit Jeju to escape the stresses of city life. The space itself serves as a futurist land, embodying its extremely tragic, ongoing histories alongside its uniquely excellent food and landscape. In this context, attending the performance on the island is significant for understanding *haenyeo* within her home/habitat, as one encounters the pervasive presence of death not only with the *haenyeo* but also across the entire island—an experience that cannot be achieved through remote, vicarious engagement elsewhere.

However, a remote, vicarious engagement is still possible through the *haenyeo*’s relationship to food. In “Bittersweet Catch: Korea’s Diving Women and the Pitfalls of Cultural Preservation” (2017), Ann Meejung Kim explores her perplexity regarding the Korean cherishment of *haenyeo* practices. Her ethnographic research, which includes attending the Haenyeo School in Jeju, established to transmit disappearing knowledge to younger generations, deepens this perplexity. Although Haenyeo School claims to be an official training process for those aspiring to become *haenyeo*, Kim observes how the *haenyeos*, the appointed teachers of the program, could not provide articulate directions, as their becoming-*haenyeo* process has mostly been undertaken through embodied transmission over an extended period. *Haenyeo*’s identity, not only as a diver/worker but also as important members of the community, with assigned roles and membership fees, further added to Kim’s confusion regarding the integrity and efficacy of the program. Graduates of the school do not automatically gain membership as legitimate *haenyeo*, despite the school’s claims.

Kim then experiences a moment of intuitive understanding of the value of *haenyeo* practice when a *haenyeo*-procured marine product arrives at her doorstep for her to consume during pregnancy. Kim writes,

A woman I did not know had dived beneath the sea and scraped the tenacious abalone from a rock—possibly going back a few times to do it—and saved it for me, as I was growing a little fetus and presumably needed the nourishment. And it was brought to my doorstep by another woman, who wished dearly for me to have it As I stared down at the squirming shellfish in the insulated Styrofoam box, suddenly conscious of the life I was carrying, it all made sense. Despite all of my reservations about the *haenyeo*, my inner critic was silent for once, unable to contain the weight of this heavy history. (Kim 2017)

In this anecdote, the overlap of burgeoning life needing nourishment and another's provision of it through investing their life energy allows Kim to momentarily recognize that the questionable effort to preserve *haenyeo* practices "all made sense." The tangibility, materiality, consumability, intimacy, and interconnectedness embodied by *haenyeo*-prepared food render the "inner critic" "silent," "unable" to address what the author was experiencing. This moment illustrates the existence of a broader framework for understanding a perilous profession cherished by many—one that cannot be fully comprehended through a purely analytical lens. The significant limitations of embodying the *haenyeo*'s work through attending Haenyeo School are at once transcended when Kim receives a live abalone, meant to be consumed for an expected, upcoming birth. I interpret this instant as an intuitive acceptance of death as an integral element of the interconnected life that humans inhabit. It illustrates, along with *Haenyeo Kitchen*, that there is an instinctive dimension to death that is not only horrifying but also comforting.

Conclusion

Aside from the "lack" of an oxygen mask, *haenyeo* are noted for their meticulous working system built upon the temporal span of breath one can endure underwater. As exemplified by the strict rule of letting go, pivotal to *haenyeo* education, their work at sea is structured through a stringent system of group work, with precise times and manners in which each registered *haenyeo* should collaborate. Above all, the system takes care to build a collective, human oxygen mask, through which *haenyeos* look out for each other when out at sea together. In this context, the individuality of the actual oxygen mask, which shifts the temporal foundation upon which the collective is built, signals a possible disruption to the meticulous *haenyeo* structure that responds promptly to unforeseen, dangerous circumstances that arise at sea, regardless of the accessibility to high-tech gear.

As many modern environmental transformations, such as climate change and deteriorating sea offerings, have rendered the *haenyeo* profession less desirable for many, the number of *haenyeo* is plunging at a drastic rate. This attests to the need and value of registering this practice as worthy of "preservation." I argue that *Haenyeo Kitchen* functions as another form of collective oxygen mask that allows people, especially outsiders, to participate in re-creating and enriching the profession, through which *haenyeos* are reborn as community elders with wisdom and experience. It enacts two kinds of collective oxygen masks, one that allows for on-site, direct appreciation of the profession by having

the audience enjoy the food prepared by the *haenyeo*, and the other supports the *haenyeo*'s work as a money-making business that feeds back into improving their life conditions.

When *haenyeos* carry death on their bodies and procure ingredients for food and business—both of which involve taking life through interactive, reciprocating structures—it serves as a reminder of the deaths that sustain all forms of living in less visible ways. In *Haenyeo Kitchen*, respecting those deaths takes the form of eating, paying, and meeting the *haenyeos* with their offerings. As the limitations of UNESCO ICH protocols remind us, the concept of postcolonial “preservation” presents conundrums, as there is no single right way to prepare for death. *Haenyeo Kitchen* demonstrates that even life affirmation is not always the correct strategy, as it imparts the embodied knowledge of “living with death” through food, which embodies the cycle of death that functions to engender life and healing for the future.

NOTES

1. The profession of sea diving for a living, primarily by women, is also found in Japan under the name *ama*. The “origin” of this profession is debated, with both nations vying for global recognition from institutions like UNESCO to validate their cultural heritage. This competition further complicates the moral concerns surrounding Korea’s urgency to “preserve” *haenyeo*. I introduce *haenyeo* as “specific to Jeju” in this project because it contextualizes *haenyeo* within Korean history and culture. Jeju has long been associated with three defining elements—rocks, wind, and women. The third element, “women,” often refers to *haenyeo*. Despite the perilous nature of diving into the sea without high-tech gear, many Jeju women became *haenyeo* to afford living expenses in the absence of men, who fled and were killed in the twentieth century during the 4.3 Incident and modernization period. The 4.3 Incident, or Jeju Uprising, was a series of conflicts from 1947 to 1954 between Jeju resistance forces and the U.S.-backed South Korean government following Japan’s retreat. Named after the 3 April 1948 uprising, it led to a brutal crackdown, including a “scorched-earth strategy” that killed nearly one-tenth of Jeju’s population. The massacre, driven by opposition to Korea’s division, remains central to contemporary Jeju identity (Kim 2010: 27). The trauma of the massacre is not a singular event to be resolved but a presence that continues to shape how people relate to the land, the sea, and the labor of the *haenyeo*. *Haenyeo Kitchen* does not attempt to address this trauma in a linear fashion but enacts a different form of engagement: one that integrates the precariousness of the *haenyeo*'s work with the life-sustaining act of eating. As such, the performance does not offer a clear resolution but invites a

mode of being with the past that is grounded in the rhythms of food, labor, and remembrance.

2. Jeju emerged as a highly sought-after travel destination around the year 2010 and regained prominence during the pandemic when international travel became challenging (Choi 2016: 132). The island's extraordinary landscape, shaped by volcanic activity and predominantly composed of basalt, offers visitors a unique and memorable experience.

3. UNESCO writes, "the culture of Jeju *haenyeo* has also contributed to the advancement of women's status in the community and promoted environmental sustainability with its eco-friendly methods and community involvement in management of fishing practices"; Soo Jin Kim writes, "The captivating embodiment of women's empowerment, ecological responsibility, and democratic values within the Haenyeo community, intricately woven through the lens of eco-feminism, has fully captured my attention."

4. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

5. In this article, I employ the concept of immersive theatre to describe a form of performance that draws the audience into the world of the production by blurring the line between the stage and auditorium. My use of this term is not driven by an interest in exploring expanded audience capacity, as is evident in representative immersive theatre productions like *Sleep No More* and the ethical issues they bring because of vulnerability and discomfort (Dinesh 2017: 2). Instead, I use it as a broad, overarching term that seeks to fully engage the audience members in the performance, allowing them to connect with and perceive reality in embodied ways.

6. Although *haenyeo*-involved food establishments enjoy popularity in Jeju, with the name *haenyeo* serving as the guarantee for the freshness and good taste of the food offered, these places seldom provide an opportunity to connect with *haenyeo* in their food preparation process or their environment, let alone listen to their stories in person.

7. These products are promoted for online purchase as well, found on https://en.haenyeokitchen.com/product/list.html?cate_no=24.

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