

Using an example of your choice, discuss the issues that arise in the presentation of a site or collection which could be termed 'difficult heritage'.

The Korean demilitarised zone, hereafter referred to as the DMZ, is the border which divides North and South Korea. It is 4 kilometres wide and 250 kilometres long, and has separated what was once a unified nation since 1953, just over seventy years ago (Kim, 2014, p.65). It is the most heavily militarised border in the world, guarded by over a million soldiers on either side (2014, p.65). The DMZ is a popular tourist attraction which draws in both local and international visitors (Bessiere and Ahn, 2021, p.1). According to statistics provided by the Korea Culture and Tourism Institute, a total of 4.9 million tourists visited the DMZ in 2018 (Kim and Barber, 2021, p.2753). Descriptions of the tour from TripAdvisor and personal accounts from YouTube are explored to provide context of the visitor experience. The border is a symbol of war and segregation (2014, p.65), and for this reason can be considered both a dark tourism location and a difficult heritage site. Due to the applicability of both concepts, they are both defined and referred to throughout this discussion. The focal point of this discussion are the issues that arise in the presentation of difficult heritage sites. The issues regarding difficult heritage sites relate to both the representation of such sites and the narratives they present, as well as the experience of visiting them (Nelson, 2020, p.299). Both of these aspects are explored to highlight some of the issues surrounding dark tourism and difficult heritage sites. Counter arguments are also explored to facilitate objective discourse. It is ultimately concluded that the narrative exhibited by a difficult heritage site should be a key consideration in the presentation of such sites.

What makes the DMZ rather notable as a difficult heritage site is that it is concurrently a representation of a past event, a memorial site, and also still an active warzone. Many consider the war to have ended in 1953, as this was when the Korean War Armistice Agreement was signed by UN forces and North Korea, which effectively suspended the war (Hunter, 2013, p.151). Despite the agreement, tensions between the north and south of the Korean peninsula are high and there is a constant potential for further conflict (2013, p.151). Dark tourism and difficult heritage sites often relate to death and trauma that has occurred in the past. However, the DMZ continues to divide two countries, and so the trauma and conflict is ongoing whilst visitors experience the site. This is likely to impact how visitors experience the site, as they are not only reflecting on a past event, but also being confronted with a very present issue. Similarly, this is likely to influence the narrative being told at the DMZ, as it is not only memorialising a past event, but allowing visitors access to a present warzone.

One way that a narrative is presented at a heritage site is through memorials, statues, and monuments, of which there are several located along the DMZ. One such monument is the reunification monument near the 3rd tunnel (fig.01). It is a rather large, evocative statue which depicts a group of people, old and young, pushing together two halves of a sphere. It appears to express a clear message of reunification, and is a significant monument in shaping the narrative told by the DMZ. Monuments fulfil a variety of functions that can be symbolic, artistic, political, or commemorative (Cudny and Appelblad, 2019, p.273). This particular monument is not a commemorative memorial to the war, but rather a symbol reflective of a particular ideology. The

presence of such a monument seems to suggest that the narrative being portrayed is a hopeful and optimistic one, choosing to focus on the goal for reunification rather than the past atrocities committed during the war.



Figure 1. Reunification Monument near the 3rd Tunnel (mediamax, 2023)

The DMZ as a tourist attraction has a lot to offer. Tourists can only visit the DMZ with a guided or private tour; the experience takes approximately seven hours and costs approximately 45 GBP per adult (Tripadvisor, 2024). There are multiple stops along the way with a lot to see and do, such as Imjingak Park which displays statues and monuments representing the Korean War, the DMZ museum which houses photographs and artefacts, Freedom Bridge, the Third Tunnel, Dorasan Station which once

connected the north and the south by train, and the Dora Observatory which offers a glance into North Korea (2024). Additionally, there are gift shops (Trickey, 2022), and a gondola ride (Michelle, 2023). There are places to eat and drink, including a Dunkin Donuts (2023). The accumulation of such sites along the border brings into question the intention behind the attraction and the narrative it aims to present. The presence of a Dunkin Donuts, which would perhaps be more fitting at an amusement park or a zoo, indicates an attempt to appeal to a global audience; it is not particularly representative of Korean heritage and history. Details such as this contribute to the narrative a tourist site presents.

Due to the DMZ being a memorial site and a warzone, it can be considered both a dark tourism and difficult heritage site. Whilst these two concepts are similar and have some overlapping components, dark tourism and difficult heritage are not synonymous. Dark tourism refers to the phenomenon of visiting locations that have an association with death and suffering, or where historic and tragic deaths have taken place (Kang *et al.*, 2012, p.257). Difficult heritage refers to sites, monuments, artwork, or other artefacts of historical significance which may be difficult to reconcile with a positive national identity (Carter and Martin, 2019, p.117). As a concept, difficult heritage is concerned with how a society deals with tangible reminders of past atrocities committed by a nation (2019, p.117). Both the number of difficult heritage tourist sites and numbers of visitors has increased substantially over recent decades (Macdonald, 2010, p.164).

One facet of the border that could be considered difficult is the issue of divided families. Following the Armistice Agreement in 1953, an estimated ten million family members became dispersed into not only North and South Korea, but a number of different countries (Lee, 1992, p.148). The cause of this separation is primarily a consequence of the war (1992, p.148). In 1983, more than 10,000 divided family members were reunited during a televised event organised by KBS, Korea Broadcasting System (Jae-hee, 2023). The live TV special, “Finding Dispersed Families” (fig.02), which was originally intended to air for one and a half hours, ran for a total of 453 hours and 45 minutes, as the KBS headquarters in Seoul attracted a sea of hopeful civilians looking to be reunited with long lost loved ones (2023). The South Korean public were so affected by the emotional impact of the reunions, and of the stories told by separated loved ones, that there was a rise in demand for reunification of family members divided by the border. Reunion events have since occurred sporadically, though there have been periods lasting as long as fifteen years where no official reunion has taken place, with the last one occurring in 2018 (2023).



Figure 2. “Finding Dispersed Families” (Jae-Hee, 2023)

The precise number of families still affected by this is not known. The previously reported number of ten million is no longer a factual figure (Foley, 2021, p.382). As of 2020, the number of surviving separated family members on the Republic of Korea Red Cross Reunion Program waiting list was 51,614 (2021, p.384), which gives an idea as to how many individuals are still affected by this issue. It is a critical and urgent issue, as many first generation divided family members have died before ever being reunited with their loved ones across the border (2021, p.384). This highlights one of the benefits of presenting the border as a tourist attraction, as it allows separated family members in South Korea to visit and feel somewhat closer to their loved ones. However, it seems rather unjust that they would have to pay nearly 50 GBP and spend a day on the tour for this purpose. This is likely not a practical or plausible option for some individuals. Whilst

the hope for reunification is presented through the DMZ's narrative, there is arguably not enough representation of dispersed families, an issue which could be considered one of the most problematic with regards to the border.

Dark tourism and difficult heritage are interesting concepts as, in a sense, such attractions contradict what could be considered the purpose of vacations and tourism. Vacations are likely often thought about as being a time for rest, relaxation, and fun. It is not farfetched to assume that one does not want to experience existential dread or confront death and suffering during a vacation. So why are many people drawn to tourist locations that have an association with death, war, slavery, or other difficult events in human history? When discussing difficult heritage sites, it is seldom the physical site itself that renders the place difficult. After all, the north and south Korean border is, in its simplest form, an arbitrary stretch of land. What makes it difficult is the knowledge one has of its associated history and significance (Nelson, 2020, p.300). Every individual who visits a difficult heritage site is likely to have a different level of knowledge, and subsequently a different emotional response to the significance of the site.

Representations of trauma can elicit difficult and challenging emotions of anger, confusion, anxiety, shame, and empathy for the suffering of others (Nelson, 2020, p.300). How one responds to such representations is likely based on their own experiences and whether or not they have a personal relationship to the trauma being represented. Some scholars have likened tourism to a rite of passage (2020, p.301). Van Gennep (1960) proposed that there are three stages to all rites of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. In alignment with these three stages, tourism

consists of being separated from one's usual daily life and environment. The tourist experience itself could be considered the transition stage. Finally, one is reincorporated into their familiar life following a vacation, likely with a renewed perspective. Thus, one could reasonably claim that vacations are a rite of passage. Nelson (2020, p.312) explores this idea in her discussion of liminality in tourism, and suggests that if a vacation is a liminal experience, in that it is a deviation from the norm, then visiting a dark heritage site deviates further from this norm, as it deviates from the norm of what is expected from a vacation. This idea could be applied to visiting the DMZ as a tourist, for which visitation usually requires joining a group tour and leaving Seoul. In this way, the DMZ border represents both a physical and metaphorical threshold. This could explain why many people are drawn to visiting the DMZ; it offers a more profound experience and the chance to cross the threshold of normality.

Visiting the DMZ can be an incredibly moving experience. Travel YouTubers Isabelle and Flo (2023) share their experience of visiting the DMZ, and express the sadness they still feel days after their experience, when thinking of the families that have been separated by the border. They also explain how they had never really known nor considered that North and South Korea were one unified country for many years, and that the division is a relatively recent occurrence. This highlights the potential that such a tourist site has to teach people about both the history and present day life of a country. This could be considered a positive impact if the intention of the site is education. However, this could present an issue from the individual's perspective, as such an experience could elicit some difficult and unsettling emotions that the visitor may be ill-prepared to deal with.

Another notable aspect of the tour is the Dora Observatory, which allows tourists the opportunity to gaze into the mystery that is North Korea. This raises certain moral and ethical questions, as such an activity could be likened to observing animals in a zoo. One could consider it disrespectful and dehumanising to allow spectators a peek into a land in which residents are not able to give their consent. YouTuber Katherine Michelle (2023) declares that this was her highlight of the tour, and states that she “had a hard time believing that that was actually happening” whilst looking out via the Dora Observatory. This indicates that this aspect of the tour is a significant component for tourists, and that the element of intrigue and disbelief is an integral aspect of their experience. However, this aspect of the tour appears only to feed into a sense of sensationalist voyeurism.



Figure 3. DMZ Souvenir Chocolate (Jonny Blair, 2012)

The DMZ features several souvenir shops which sell a variety of items such as key-rings, magnets, apparel, chocolate (fig.03), North Korean banknotes, and authentic North Korean alcohol (Ashleysplanet, 2023). Pieces of barbed wire from the border fences are also sold, so tourists can take home a piece of the border with them (Trickey, 2022). This is perhaps a particularly sombre souvenir, due to the prickly nature of the material which, one could argue, represents the uncomfortable nature of the site. The rise of difficult heritage and dark tourism raises the significant question of whether it is moral or ethical to commercialise death and trauma for the consumption of tourists (Chen and Xu, 2021, p.2167). Similarly, the presence of souvenir shops at the DMZ raises some pertinent moral considerations regarding the commercialisation of difficult heritage and dark tourism sites. Firstly, if one buys souvenirs at the DMZ, who or what is that money supporting? Secondly, if one returns from their holiday sporting a DMZ t-shirt, what message are they communicating to the world? Would it be an exclamation of support for the border, and for the consequential separation of two countries and its people? Conversely, does it signify support for those who have been negatively impacted by the Korean war? Perhaps it is a status symbol, simply denoting that one is well travelled and has visited some exotic and interesting places. These questions highlight the issues surrounding souvenirs at a difficult heritage site. However, Cave and Buda (2018, p.708-709) argue that souvenirs deriving from a site of death, trauma, and atrocities are more infused with emotional significance than other types of souvenirs, and that for this reason, they could be seen as tools for sharing and renegotiating history. With this in mind, perhaps wearing a DMZ t-shirt would allow for discussion and learning about the present and past issues. It is reasonable to conclude that the

souvenirs sold at a tourist or heritage site is one aspect of the site's narrative, and that the souvenirs one chooses is an extension of that narrative. For this reason, it is perhaps worth considering the narrative that one is perpetuating when selecting souvenirs.

The DMZ is a significant and poignant difficult heritage site. It is a symbol of war, division, and trauma. At the same time, it is a symbol of hope for reunification, and a place to learn about the Korean War, an integral aspect of the two countries' history and national identity. It is both a memorial site and an active warzone, meaning that the DMZ can be classed as a dark tourism and a difficult heritage site. The DMZ is not simply a guarded border, it is an attraction consisting of a multitude of things to see and do. Through these various attractions the DMZ presents a particular narrative that forms the representation of the site and shapes the visitor experience. One of the most prominent ongoing issues that the border perpetuates is that of divided families in North and South Korea. Whilst the presence of the DMZ might allow separated family members to visit and feel closer to their loved ones, it fails to be a humanitarian substitute for reuniting divided families. Dark tourism and difficult heritage can rouse a lot of difficult and unsettling emotions in visitors, which raises the question of why people choose to visit such sites. Vacations could be considered a rite of passage, and being confronted with dark and difficult history may induce an experience of liminality that is more profound than if one instead visited a beach. Despite this explanation, one of the issues with difficult heritage is precisely the visitor experience. Whilst it may be seen as a positive thing to learn about a country's difficult history, it can elicit a range of difficult emotions in the visitor that they may not be prepared to deal with. Another

aspect of the DMZ that is problematic is that tourists have the opportunity to glance into North Korea. This is, for many people, an awe-inspiring aspect of the tour. However, it raises some important moral and ethical questions relating to voyeurism, and raises the question of whether it is morally correct to observe a country at war as though it is a painting in a museum. Visitors to the DMZ can purchase souvenirs to commemorate their trip, which could be seen as problematic when it is taken into consideration who is profiting from the selling of souvenirs, what messages they send, and how the presence of souvenirs ties into the site's narrative. Ultimately, there are a number of issues and benefits in both the presentation and experience of visiting the DMZ, and a key factor which compounds these issues and benefits is the narrative presented by the DMZ. Thus, the narrative should be an important consideration when presenting difficult heritage.

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