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Summer Research Reflection

Pedaling home at dusk along the riverbank, Thames



Preface

My summer research explored cultural property law, focusing on how legal frameworks influence restitution disputes in the United Kingdom. The six-week venture was rewarding and self-affirming on academic, geographic, and personal dimensions. I gained new appreciation for London, coupled with a more critical lens on its cultural institutions, and discovered what it means to conduct scholarly work.

At the same time, this summer was expressly about recognising the strengths and limits of my passion. On one hand, the project reaffirmed my interest in legal and cultural justice; on the other, it confronted me with steep learning curves. Although my confidence faltered at times, the experience ultimately encouraged me to be resourceful, independent, and persistent throughout the term.

A curious encounter—Yoshitomo Nara's exhibit at Hayward Gallery, Southbank (an artistic expression of how researching felt at first)



Negotiating Doubt

Much like the City of London itself, my research unfolded within boundaries that were vast and difficult to pin down at times. This lack of clarity was most pronounced in the first few weeks of fieldwork, when I began to doubt my methodology, wondering if it was perhaps too journalistic by design. Considering the Parthenon Marbles as a live and evolving dispute, I wasn't sure how to systematically investigate the subject matter. As I read more, I began to worry that the qualitative and doctrinal methods I had chosen were ill-suited to making an original contribution to the field.

In hindsight, what lay at the heart of this struggle was dismantling the rigid definitions I had set for myself. In moments of doubt, *researcher* and *fieldwork* felt especially unearned—skills I hadn't mastered, thus roles I didn't feel entitled to. It took numerous attempts to define my

'museum ethnography' component, rehashed in my own words and free from textbook influence. Understanding came through practice, and not the other way around: *visiting exhibits, reading, taking notes, and asking questions*. It was also there, at the museum, that I became truly immersed by my work, positively overwhelmed by the endless arrays of exhibits, each presenting a unique case study for restitution. At home, however, the experience inverted itself; research turned out to involve a surprising bulk of emailing, echoing the rhythm of a desk job. This juxtaposition redefined preconceived notions of data collection as being just breakthroughs and site visits; it took practice to grow mentally accustomed to sitting idle at home drafting emails, without blaming myself for what might have seemed like time lost.

My first setback abroad came through this *en masse* correspondence: lawmakers I had hoped to speak with were either too busy or unresponsive. This rejection revealed that perhaps my expectations had been too high. In a checkpoint meeting, my supervisor suggested I contact journalists and legal scholars instead—people who were more receptive than busy politicians, whose reputations were perpetually on the line. This adjustment proved rewarding. I managed to secure my first interview within days: a three-hour exchange at a café with a journalist from Greece's top newspaper. A few months prior, a Financial Times journalist had sat in those same seats interviewing the British Museum Director. Reinterpreting that moment on my own terms became a source of self-affirmation.

Leadership Capacities

Curiosity

While conducting ethnography at the British Museum, I found a new outlet for my travel-inspired curiosity: it helped me excavate an expansive range of ongoing cultural property disputes. Visiting museums across London, I took note of how restitution was institutionally framed and omitted in institutional literature. Interestingly, the particularities of this approach varied from one institution to another, but none was more distinct than the Louvre during my short trip to Paris. Expecting it to be relatively comparable, I quickly realised that the Louvre was far too large to study systematically. The visit instead became a chance to survey broader museum culture; I ultimately omitted this fieldwork from my research report, allowing me to consciously narrow the scope to the UK.

Sociocultural Attunement

Equally important was cultivating sociocultural intelligence. In my case, this manifested in an attunement to new perspectives on identity, heritage, and justice. This skill surfaced most prominently during interviews with NGOs and advocacy groups. Their work seemed intimately tied to restitution in ways that transcended the legal and policy arguments I had studied. These conversations led me to be aware of restitution as not an abstract legal puzzle but an ongoing cultural conflict, one in which both sides have vested interests—internationalist and nationalist alike. Grappling with these perspectives made me reflect on what "culture" entails, while underscoring the importance of empathy in research—particularly when it involves communities.

