

RECONSTRUCTION STUDIES

(footnote: curiosity opened the door)

Notes Toward a Field

THE SCENE THAT STARTED EVERYTHING

If I had never met my South Indian, Telugu wife while studying abroad in Dublin at twenty-one, the field I now call Reconstruction Studies wouldn't exist — because the story that made this theory possible would never have begun.

That meeting was the first door — small, unannounced, a glitch in the ordinary — but it opened into a world I had never been prepared to enter. South Asia wasn't a place I could map. It wasn't a history I could name. I didn't know its borders. I didn't know its wounds. Partition wasn't a word I had ever heard. Caste wasn't a system I understood, nor how its hierarchies echoed the anti-Blackness that shaped my own world.

And the truth is, my archives were limited.

I was a first-generation Ugandan-American growing up in the conservative Midwest. But even that archive carried its own silences. My parents didn't speak about Indians at all — not because they were hiding something, but because their emotional bandwidth was spent on survival after fleeing Uganda in 1975. Their silence left a blank space in my understanding: no stories, no warnings, no inherited narrative about what relationships between our communities could mean.

Sometimes the absence is the archive.

So when I saw an attractive woman in the kitchen-dining room of my student dormitory — even though I was coming out of a bad breakup — I didn't hesitate. I didn't calculate community, consequence, or category. The scripts that should have stopped me simply weren't there.

Because the archives that were supposed to shape me didn't load.

And that failure — that absence — was the rupture that made everything that followed possible.

WHAT WE INHERIT — THE ECOLOGY OF ARCHIVES

We imagine archives as boxes in basements. But the real archives are the systems that shape us long before we understand we're being shaped

In Reconstruction Studies, I work with five shaping archives:

Family (silence, myth, gesture)

State (law, nation, belonging)

School (curriculum, canon, epistemology)

Media (representation, stereotype)

Migration (rupture, reinvention)

Some load cleanly.

Some arrive distorted — like a file corrupted in transit, carrying echoes of someone else's fear.

And some never arrive at all.

Together they form an ecology of archives — not a single instruction, but overlapping ones that often contradict each other.

Beneath them all lies an older memory architecture. Partition did not begin in Delhi, London, or Karachi. Its architecture began in Berlin in 1884, where neither Africans nor South Asians were present, yet the borders that would later govern our lives were drafted in silence.

Those lines still move through our families, our nations, our fears, and our desires.

When inherited archives collide, meaning becomes unstable. That is where Reconstruction begins.

MISRECOGNITION — WHEN THE ARCHIVE FAILS

Misrecognition is what happens when the archive insists on one story and life insists on another.

It is the moment when a person, a story, or an encounter misaligns with its category — exceeding it, contradicting it, or falling beneath what the archive insists must be true.

This misalignment is not accidental. It is inherited.

Colonial literature, missionary tracts, caste reform movements, racial science — these produced the templates communities still use to read one another. They taught fear, hierarchy, purity, and distance long before intimacy, solidarity, or complexity could enter the frame.

The gap between archive and encounter is the space where identity fractures. This is the first site of Reconstruction.

MISFIRES — GLOBAL FRAGMENTS

Misfires are the moments when inherited archives fall out of sync with lived reality. They happen quietly, globally, across communities never meant to speak to — or love — one another in the first place.

The Caribbean

The Caribbean is often described as a place where Afro and Indo have merged — harmony made visible in foodways like doubles, in chutney music, in shared festivals.

But intimacy tells another story.

Families still fracture over relationships that cross the color line.
Public culture celebrates mixture;
private life enforces purity.

Calyponian Mighty Douglá captured this contradiction generations ago:

“If ah’m Black, they call me Indian;
If ah’m Indian, they call me Black.
So what yuh want me to do?
Split me in two?”

His lament is not a punchline. It is the emotional record of an archive collision — a person asked to divide themselves so communities can keep their categories intact.

A narrative of unity stretched over a reality of refusal.

East Africa / India

At Entebbe passport control, the officer studies my family — my wife, our children, their mixed skin tones — and asks me in Luganda, “Where did you find the Indian woman?”

He explains that “we don’t mix like that in Uganda,” which, in many contexts, is correct. But historically, Afro-Indian intimacies have always existed in East Africa. They were simply unarchived, unspoken, pushed out of public memory.

A silenced lineage is still a lineage.
Misrecognition does not erase the past; it only hides the file.

The Left Hand

Both our children are left-handed. Their grandfather in Chennai was left-handed too — before a Catholic nun beat it out of him in school.

So at my son’s namakaram ceremony in Birmingham, everyone waits for him to reach for the offering with his right hand — the “pure” one.

He reaches with his left.

WHAT RECONSTRUCTION IS

Reconstruction is the work that begins when inherited archives no longer agree.

Misrecognition is the spark.

Archive collisions are the fire that forces reconstruction.

They occur when the stories we inherit demand different things from the same body: purity versus intimacy, caste versus Blackness, nation versus migration.

The archive splits. The category fails. And reconstruction becomes urgent.

Reconstruction Studies offers a method for rebuilding meaning after inherited memory collapses — reading misfires, tracing misrecognition, and assembling a self from fragments the archive could not hold together.

What follows is the core diagnostic framework through which Reconstruction Studies reads misrecognition.

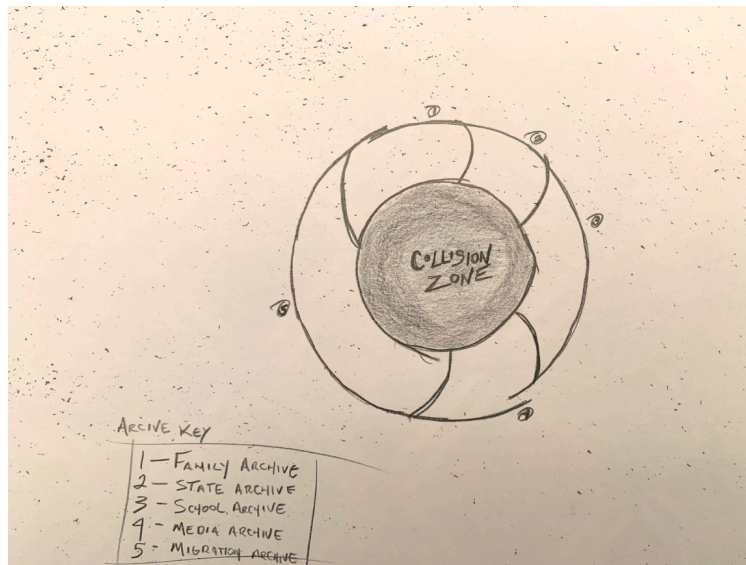


Figure 1. Archive Collisions — Diagnostic Framework

ARCHIVE COLLISIONS — INTERPERSONAL

Love is often the first place where inherited archives panic.

Before politics, before movements, before theory, romantic intimacy forces a confrontation between what a person feels and what they have been taught to fear. It introduces permanence—lineage, children, visibility—into systems designed to regulate purity, reputation, and belonging.

In Black × South Asian relationships, this collision is especially acute. Desire does not simply cross cultural boundaries; it threatens entire architectures of caste, color, and social survival. What appears externally as “family disapproval” is, in practice, a convergence of inherited archives—caste hierarchies, colonial anti-Blackness, gendered obedience, and communal reputation.

The result is not always rupture. More often, it is concealment.

Adults with financial independence still rehearse double lives—introducing partners as “friends,” asking lovers to leave their own homes when parents visit, managing intimacy as logistics rather than truth. Adulthood proves insufficient to override inherited memory. The archive does not loosen its grip simply because time has passed.

*This is an interpersonal archive collision:
when intimacy demands honesty, but inheritance demands silence.*

Mental health consequences follow predictably—anxiety, isolation, depression—not because love is unstable, but because the self is forced to split across incompatible archives. People are not confused about what they want; they are disciplined into believing that wanting itself is a form of betrayal.

Love exposed the gap before institutions could name it. Only recently—through the convergence of lockdown, racial reckoning, and community-led care—have culturally competent counselors begun to speak openly about these collisions. Communities felt the misalignment long before institutions developed the language to treat it.

When institutions lag, communities absorb the cost.

WHO CARRIES SOLIDARITY — THE COUNTER-ARCHIVE

If Bandung 1.0 had allowed women at the table, our archive of Afro-Asian solidarity would look different.

We know this because it already does.

Over 80% of the people who sustain South Asians for Black Lives and the BlindianProject are women — doing the emotional labor, the relational work, the memory-keeping.

And across South Asia and its diaspora, it has been Dalit feminists — from Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Equality Labs to writers like Yashica Dutt — who have carried caste abolition on their backs.

The formal archive remembers the men.
The living archive is overwhelmingly built by women.

Reconstruction Studies names that truth.

WHAT RECONSTRUCTION MAKES POSSIBLE

Reconstruction Studies is not a closed claim. It is a method others can use.

Personally — it allows us to rewrite the internal archive, naming what shaped us without letting it define us.

Communally — it helps explain why solidarity is difficult, and what inherited fears must be unlearned for it to become possible.

Institutionally — it offers a way to diagnose silences, distortions, and narrative gaps, asking why certain histories survive while others disappear.

Reconstruction Studies helps us understand not only why solidarity falters — but what it would take to rebuild it.

THE WORK OF RECONSTRUCTION

Reconstruction is not repair.

It is recognition:

of what shaped us,

of what mis-shaped us,

and of what we can now choose to do differently.

Reconstruction Studies offers language and method for that work — for reading inherited archives without obeying them, for locating the misfires that open possibility, for understanding why solidarity falters and how it might be rebuilt.

The archive will not change on its own.

But the way we read it — and the way we refuse it — can.

Reconstruction is the practice of that refusal.

The practice of building meaning after misrecognition.

The practice of making new maps where old borders still live.

Reconstruction Studies does not save the world.

But it gives us a way to meet one another outside the stories we were given.

Sometimes that is where reconstruction begins.