Arthur Ashe: Philosopher in Motion

By Jeanine Weekes Schroer

“Negroes are getting more confidence. They are asking for more and more, and they are getting more and more. They are looser. They’re liberal. In a way ‘liberal’ is a synonym for loose. And that’s exactly the way Arthur plays.” Clark Graebner made these comments while discussing his 1968 U.S. Open semi-final match against Arthur Ashe; he goes on to further characterize the “looseness” in Ashe’s style of play, a style that Graebner believed would allow him to defeat Ashe. He didn’t. Nonetheless, his comments have a strange resonance; they have the ring of truth — not so much about black folk, not even necessarily about Arthur Ashe. Instead, these remarks tell us something about race in the United States. The take on race and people of color expressed in Graebner’s comments was common for his time and is probably fairly common even now. He believed that understanding Arthur Ashe as a tennis player, as a man, was best accomplished by understanding him as a “negro.” Despite the unsettling nature of such a sentiment, Graebner may not have been entirely wrong.

Almost no one would argue that it is possible to understand individuals of color, especially those living in racist cultures, without any consideration of their lives as members of some race. Just as few, however, would argue that understanding a white person requires consideration of their lives as members of the white race. While race is a problem and defining in the lives of people of color, it is often inconsequential, insignificant, or even invisible in the lives of members of the white race. This one-way objectification typifies race relations in U.S. culture, both in Graebner’s era and in this one. Arguably this conception of race, both a result and a source of racial injustice, contains a kernel of truth: for many people of color, race plays a significant role in their self-understanding and their way of being in the world. This was
undoubtedly true for Arthur Ashe. Race infused more than just Ashe’s political attitudes and actions; his character and personality were also constructed by his racial identity. There is a sense in which Graebner was correct: the way Ashe played tennis and the way he lived was a reflection of his racial identity. From his early tennis career under the tutelage of Dr. Walter Johnson where he was taught to cope with playing tennis in the Jim Crow south to his battle with apartheid in South Africa to raising his daughter, Camera, beautiful and black in the public eye, Ashe seemed actively engaged in a project of understanding the role race played in his life and the role his life might play in understanding race. This latter project will be resumed in this chapter.

This chapter will invert Graebner’s lens; instead of trying to understand the man by understanding his race, this chapter attempts to mine Ashe’s life for vital insights into the social life, the politics, and the metaphysics of race. I will proceed by discussing the social, political, metaphysical, and conceptual problems that hinder serious endeavors to understand race. The remainder of the chapter will focus on Arthur Ashe and how his life both clarifies the challenges for our conceptions of race and provides a guide for tackling those challenges.  

The Race Problem

In our world of cell phone cameras, viral videos, and instant infamy, to say that race is a touchy subject borders on wild understatement. For example, Lleyton Hewitt came under fire over remarks he made during one of his 2001 U.S. Open matches. Many interpreted his reference to similarities between a black line judge making unfavorable calls and his opponent, James Blake, as racist.  For people who fear they could be the next objects of public scorn, these incidents force them to take a defensive, reactive position toward race. They may feel they have only two options: They can become outlaws who flout “political correctness” and bask in
language, viewpoints, and practices that violate taboos. Alternately, they can become model citizens, disguise any and all aspects of themselves that could be perceived as racist, avoid engagement in serious discussions of race, and indulge in platitudes — i.e. “I come from a multicultural country. I’m not racial in any way at all.” As a result, complex and subtle critiques of the racial status quo have difficulty gaining a purchase in major public forums:

consider the challenge posed by Martina Navratilova’s claim that Serena and Venus Williams are treated with kid gloves because of their race or the continued lack of empathy for Richard Williams’ charges of racism on the women’s tennis tour.

Despite our inability to talk seriously about race — undoubtedly also because of that inability — race continues to be a significant social concern. Blacks, for example, are more likely to be poor than whites, earn nearly forty percent less than whites, and have one-eighth the net worth of whites; blacks are also overrepresented among those arrested, prosecuted, incarcerated, and executed. These disproportions demand explanation; however, an actual debate about them — one that has some hope of being progressive — would require that folks on all sides be able to sustain deep and thoughtful discourse despite defensiveness, resentment, and tears. If ever we do find ourselves able to penetrate the social obstacles to a serious discussion of race, we will be confronted by an astounding set of conceptual difficulties. The first obstacle is just to understand what it is we are really talking about when we talk about race.

**The Problem with ‘Race’**

In certain ways, it is less difficult to talk about the social injustices stemming from race than it is to talk about race itself. We have a sense of the meaning of the claim, “These folks are oppressed.” There is a sense of what information is necessary to prove or disprove the claim. The concern evoked by citing the statistics about poverty and imprisonment above is that they
are at least partially explained by oppression — both the legacy of violent oppression like chattel slavery as well as a continuing oppression in the form of “disadvantage[s] and injustice[s] some people suffer . . . because of [among other things] the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society.”

The people in question, in this case, are black folk; people designated as having the racial identity: black. This is where the trouble begins. Whether and how black folk are oppressed — especially whether their oppression persists through a structure hidden within liberal democracy — is a difficult question in itself; however, before we can answer that question we must answer difficult questions about just what and who we are talking about when we say “black.” Fortunately, there has been an explosion of research in the metaphysics of race — inquiry aimed at explaining what kind of claims one is making about people and the world they inhabit when one attributes racial membership to them. I will proceed by sketching the major theories that attempt to explain what race really is.

It is commonly believed that racial categories tell us something about our bodies. The idea is that the particular combination of skin color, lip and nose shape, and hair texture typically identified with black folk is not accidental. Race — as opposed to ethnicity, culture, or nationality — is supposed to capture variations in human features explained by biology. This view — “that there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, that allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race” — is known as racialism.

This is, perhaps, the most widely held view of race. It is also the most problematic. Alongside any number of superficial physical traits, racialism has typically claimed that certain moral, intellectual, and even spiritual traits are determined by race
as well. When these differences have been used as justification for things like apartheid and the Jim Crow laws that shadowed Ashe’s life, then racialism becomes racism.  

Racialism claims that race is “real,” that our talk about race points to sets of genes that manifest as certain skin colors, hair textures, and so on, that make one a member of some race or another. In order for racialism to be true, we ought to be able to identify sets of genes or inherited traits that are genuinely unique to members of specific races. What we have found, instead, is that black folk are as different from each other as they are from other racial groups and the traits that are supposed to be unique to blacks appear in other races. As a result of these and other findings, as well as the role it plays in justifying racism, racialism has been widely rejected.

Those who want to think seriously about race are left with few options: many thinkers find themselves in the position of trying to understand races as real but as something other than biological essences. The main strategy for defending the race concept is racial constructivism. Racial constructivists acknowledge that biological theories of race fail — either by failing to identify criteria for biological distinction or by failing to make sense of race terms — but insist that our talk captures real features of human social life. They argue that race is real because it is a successful social construction: various societies have succeeded at establishing a social order where distinctions based largely on an arbitrary set of physical traits are meaningful and significant. Constructivist views must satisfy two major requirements of a theory of race: First, such theories must explain race while correcting or eluding the racism revealed by efforts to hold onto failed biological theories of race. Second, race theories should provide us with some of the tools that will allow us to address racial injustice. Key to satisfying both of these conditions is
offering a coherent story of how race is socially constructed. There are significant disagreements among racial constructivists as to what that story is.

I will discuss two distinct constructivist strategies: materialist constructivism and what I will call narrative constructivism.¹⁶ What distinguishes these two views is a disagreement about what drives the construction. Materialists understand race as “economically driven, related to the structure of capitalism and the projects of the bourgeoisie.” Narrationists will primarily “attribute [race] to culture/ideas/‘discourses.’”¹⁷ This chapter will use Arthur Ashe’s life to argue that neither materialist constructivism nor narrative constructivism is a viable candidate for capturing the reality of race.

**Materialist Constructivism and the Assignment Problem**

Materialist accounts of race tend to focus on how superficial physical traits are used to group individuals in such a way as to mark them out for a specific set of roles in a socioeconomic structure. In his *The Racial Contract*, a thorough execution of the materialist strategy, Charles Mills argues that the separation of the world’s populations into races was key to five hundred years of European imperialism and conquest, providing justification for claiming both human and nonhuman resources.¹⁸ Such a view explains racial oppression, capturing both a meaningful conception of race and its connection to a wide range of social injustices. Black folks are those, like Ashe, whose dark skin is used to justify subjecting them to particular types of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.¹⁹ Difficulties arise when we try to group folks in accord with the materialist’s racial categories. This chapter will refer to this as the “assignment problem.”²⁰

The life and experiences of Arthur Ashe provide examples of the assignment problem. Based on his superficial features, he would have been marked for racial oppression. The
materialist would call him black; however, the story of his life — both the material facts and his assessment of it — presents a picture not entirely consistent with that assignment. Ashe grew up in a segregated Richmond, Virginia. Most of the public tennis courts were unavailable to him because he was black, and he was refused entry into a number of tournaments because of his race. Despite this, Ashe described his life as “a succession of fortunate circumstances.”

Ashe quietly kicked down doors that had been closed to African-Americans. He showed his black face in what were formerly white spaces: tennis courts from Virginia to South Africa and everywhere between. He even excelled, winning the first U.S. Open, as well as the Australian Open and Wimbledon. He was a member of six winning U.S. Davis Cup teams (four as a player, and two as the coach).

Ashe was educated, a world traveler, a political activist, and a philanthropist. The material circumstances of Ashe’s life pose a challenge to materialist accounts of race.

Though his features mark him for racial oppression, he managed, ultimately, to avoid many of the worst material burdens imposed by racial injustice. This anecdote from Ashe’s own personal engagement with the question of race captures the difficulty: While discussing affirmative action with a young privileged black man, Ashe asks the young man whether he would have accepted entrance into law school under the rule of affirmative action if his grades had not met the normal admission standards. The young man says he would because, “As a black, I belong to a group that has been historically abused and discriminated against. I’m entitled to redress.” Ashe’s concern is that this young man “was born and brought up in luxury, with the best teachers and private schools from kindergarten on up. [He had] lived a charmed life.” Ashe says pointedly, “Affirmative action wasn’t meant for you, surely.” Precisely what
Ashe is suggesting is that his dark skin is not, should not be, enough to qualify him for affirmative action, to qualify him as black under a materialist account of race.\(^{26}\)

Billie Jean King once remarked, “I’m blacker than Arthur.”\(^{27}\) Some have argued that the remark was a criticism of Ashe’s moderate politics, while some have called it just plain stupid.\(^{28}\) Ashe interpreted this as yet another criticism of his composure, but there is reason to think this offhand remark may have been a complex mingling of ideas about Ashe’s politics, his composure, and what it means to be black. Ashe considered King a friend. He spoke with passion of the incredible contributions she made to her sport and the world, calling her “the most important tennis player, male or female. . .since World War II.”\(^{29}\) He spoke with sympathy about the incredible personal costs those contributions entailed. King’s radical politics and the ugly and public end of a personal relationship that “outed” her made her anathema to sponsors. Despite that, she continued to be an advocate for women and gays on and off the courts. Ashe believed that the anger that provoked King’s remark about him was righteous, justified. I agree, but a righteous and justified anger about what? I cannot help but wonder if part of what motivated her to make this remark about race is a sense that part of the story of being black is a story about being oppressed. Only King can know what was in her mind at that moment. My particular interpretation could be incorrect, but the idea that Arthur Ashe when alone with Billie Jean King is not necessarily the blackest person in the room, \textit{for whatever reason}, captures the assignment problem.

Materialists rely on the same superficial characteristics that racialism does in assigning people to racial categories. In doing so, they will identify folks like Ashe as blacks despite the fact that they have managed to avoid a significant amount of the material consequences of racial oppression. Perhaps they should not. Part of the virtue of the materialist account is that it groups
together the sufferers of racial injustice, thus providing straightforward language for talking about policies for correction and compensation. Were it to leave out the most privileged blacks — people for whom the material consequences of race were minimized or absent altogether — it would be a credit to the view. The exclusion of that segment of the population creates a representation of race that can answer questions about who deserves aid through the redistribution of goods and opportunities. It would certainly be more consistent with a position that claims that it is economy more than anything else that defines us as members of one race or another.

Any theory will be imperfect in its assignment of racial identity, but the problem here is more significant for two reasons: First, success in the pursuit of racial justice has assured that Ashe is not simply an anomaly. A number of black folk finds themselves in careers where the vast majority of their colleagues are white, living in neighborhoods where the majority of their neighbors are white, even having social and private lives that are largely populated by white folks. The children of interracial couples add another layer to this complexity. These folks just do not easily fit into the confines of a system that defines race significantly by appeal to material circumstances, and their numbers are bound to expand. The second reason to suspect that the materialist account is incomplete — regardless of whether it uses economic status as a definitive measure of race and excludes those like Ashe or whether it defers to common perception and includes him — is that it seems unprepared to manage the fact that even extremely successful blacks, like Ashe, identify race as the greatest burden of their lives.\(^\text{30}\) The burden of race for these folks is not fundamentally a matter of economics; it is existential. The materialist account must, it seems, treat this significant existential burden as extraneous.
Narrative Constructivism and the Authenticity Problem

W.E.B. Du Bois’s “The Conservation of Races” is a seminal work in narrative constructivism; it calls for the formation of an “American Negro Academy” whose purpose would be the development and preservation of the unique spiritual message that black people have for the world.31 Precisely what it demands is that blacks as a people undertake the intellectual project of constructing a black racial identity. While some Narrationists believe that a properly constructed black identity simply fulfills the destiny of the black race, others have defended it on more practical grounds: “In order for a people in a hostile society to flourish as a people, their self-identity must be anchored by a conception of the good that is independent of the hostility that they wish to avoid.” That narrative — a group’s conception of its good — must define values, identify positive goals, specify points of historical significance, and cannot be shared by others. This narrative fosters the trust necessary for the cooperation that will allow flourishing in the face of adversity.32 This is a view to which Ashe was sympathetic.

In October of 1973, a splendid weekend in Paris was ruined for him by a story in The Guardian describing the U.S. agreeing to support Portugal continuing to control their African colonies in exchange for continued use of their Azores bases. What saddened him most about this was the non-response he anticipated from blacks in the U.S. “The black population in America will not blink an eye at this. There are many more blacks than Jews in the U.S., yet the Jews look out for their brothers overseas and affect our international policies — and we blacks don’t, or perhaps can’t.”33 Many of his racial justice projects involved promoting a positive black identity that would help blacks negotiate the hostile racial landscape they faced in the U.S. and in Africa.
Narrative accounts have been comprehensively criticized, but I will focus on what I call the “authenticity problem.” Du Bois claims that careful study reveals that the world’s history is a history of races, among them “the Negroes of Africa and America.” The idea that American and African blacks are unified by a common racial project has provoked severe criticism. It has been argued that nothing can serve to unite blacks worldwide while also distinguishing them from other oppressed racial groups. Narrationists define race as a set of ideals that bind members of racial groups to each other to the exclusion of other racial groups. For this process to be authentic the unifying ideals need to be substantial and the identification with these ideals — the attachment and sense of connection to them — needs to be earnest. Narrative accounts have difficulty satisfying each of these elements of authenticity. Even when Du Bois first published “The Conservation of Races” in 1897, there would have been a significant cultural gap between blacks in the U.S. and blacks in Africa. As time has passed, these two groups have diverged even more. The race-related difficulties faced by blacks in Chicago are quite different from the race-related difficulties faced by blacks in Darfur. In fact, that the struggle has some connection to race might be the only commonality. However, “if what [U.S. blacks have] in common with Africa is a history of ‘discrimination and insult’ then this binds [them] to...‘yellow Asia and...the South Seas’ also.” Racial injustice is not substantial enough to bind blacks to each other without also binding them to all non-white racial groups. It is also insufficient to foster cooperation; it does not give blacks reason to act together. Avoiding the harms of racial oppression is something one might just as well do on one’s own.

Developing a more substantial narrative or set of ideals is well within the grasp of any racial group. This narrative, however, must also be something with which blacks can earnestly identify. Any substantial black narrative runs the risk of alienating large portions of the group it
aims to define. Again, Arthur Ashe’s life offers insight into the problem. Ashe confronted the disunity of black identity on multiple occasions. Ashe began pursuing opportunities to play tennis in South Africa in the late sixties. His goal was to have an opportunity to see the horrors of apartheid with his own eyes. After doing so, he became an envoy for blacks living under apartheid. Not everyone agreed with his methods. South African students heckled him during a speaking engagement at Howard University; they accused him of being an Uncle Tom and of betrayal. Ashe countered the students’ accusations by asking why they believed that the honorable response to apartheid was to “hide” in school in the United States.\textsuperscript{39} Similar charges were leveled when he played the South African Open in Johannesburg.\textsuperscript{40} In this instance, both sides better articulated their concerns. His one-time visits, they argued, made no real change. They believed that only economic isolation — boycotts — would end apartheid. Ashe’s presence, they insisted, supported the status quo and, thus, hurt blacks. Ashe, in his defense, offered the history of seemingly small actions taken by seemingly inconsequential persons making an extraordinary impact. His example to the South Africans was Rosa Parks. He pleaded with them to recognize all the ways that change might come and the key role their patient persistence would play in that change. He left South Africa believing they remained unconvinced. This circumstance is especially revealing of the difficulties that attend the absence of a unifying black narrative. Precisely what Ashe struggled to do was offer a story of his actions that would allow black South Africans to perceive him as an ally. Differences in the histories of their two struggles — the struggle for civil rights in the U.S. and the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa — made identifying this common ground very difficult.

On another occasion, Ashe felt that disunity as he struggled internally with a decision to prevent his daughter from being filmed playing with a white doll on national television. Aware
of public expectations that he actively advocate for justice for blacks, Ashe found himself worrying that he would be perceived as allowing his daughter to embrace white standards of beauty, anxiously anticipating the backlash, and resentful of the whole situation. In the end, he stopped his daughter from playing with the doll, but he was not happy about it. “I am angry with myself because I have just acted out of pure practicality, not out of morality. The moral act would have been to let Camera have her fun. . . . Instead, I tampered with her innocence.”

Again, Ashe found himself aware of an ideological disunity between himself and some other elements of the black community. Though Narrationists are better able to answer the challenge that Ashe’s particular racial burdens pose for race theories than are Materialists, they cannot do so without risking alienating someone they would rather include.

A Loose Negro

The fundamental challenge facing constructivism can be stated quite simply, “There is nothing in the world that can do all that we ask ‘race’ to do for us.” We need it to capture what it is about the dark-skinned peoples of the world that explains why they consistently suffer the worst material circumstances and reap the least of the society’s benefits. We also need it to tell non-whites how to hold up their heads, what they stand for, who they are, how to live, and how to thrive. We want it to do all this as some discrete metaphysical entity that is apparent and easily described. Unfortunately, race eludes us, because it is not what we thought it was. The fundamental lesson revealed by the constructivist dilemma — Are Materialists correct despite the assignment failures or is the Narrationist correct despite the problem of inauthenticity? — is that race is no one thing. We must acknowledge the way that something rightly called “race” has shaped the history of nations and altered the economic and social lives of millions of people, white and non-white. We must also realize that people must subjectively engage race; people
must figure out how to live race, i.e., how to be black. These two projects will not be unified in virtue of finding that they track some common metaphysical reality. What unites these two projects is that both are about identifying, defining, and managing a peculiar set of constraints: the obligation to wrestle with the ghost that is race.

One of the undersold strengths of constructivism is its recognition that race is dynamic. Most constructivist theories engage with the idea that race has changed over time and will continue to do so. The dilemma between materialist and narrative constructivism reveals that race also shifts between two different perspectives. One perspective takes a wide view, seeing how people are parts of a large and complex social system that is capable of affecting nearly every aspect of their lives. A second perspective takes a narrower view, acknowledging the personal project of seeing and making a life for oneself. To get what we need from race we need to accept it for what it is, all that it is. We need to stay on our toes and be prepared to move. In what remains of this chapter, I will argue that in his life, Arthur Ashe incorporated the strengths of both materialist and narrative constructivist approaches to race while avoiding many of their pitfalls. He allowed himself the freedom to traverse the divide in race.

Ashe’s anti-apartheid activism showed this deftness of foot. Central to the materialist account of race is an awareness of race as an external force that shapes our lives without our permission. Superficial features are the basis for racial assignments, but being perceived as a member of one race or another has profound consequences. These realities of race — the way racism controls lives and changes souls — were brought home to Ashe during his early visits to South Africa during apartheid. He was playing the South African Open in Johannesburg and a teenage boy followed him everywhere. Ashe finally asked the boy why he was following him. The boy said, “You are the first truly free black man I have ever seen.” In that moment, Ashe
found what was for him the fundamental injustice of apartheid: it programmed and destined young blacks for a lifetime of servitude. The harsh realities of race in South Africa under apartheid would remake this boy in ways that Ashe found intolerable. Ashe never lost sight of these serious material consequences of race. Apartheid did more than make those boys serve; it made them servants.

Ashe first applied for a visa to play in the South African Open in 1969 and was refused. He applied again in 1970 and was refused again. When he applied again in 1973, the visa was granted. It just so happens that South Africa was also readmitted to the Davis Cup competition by the International Lawn and Tennis Federation that year. Ashe articulated what almost anyone might have thought, “A more cynical man than I might think that I was a quid pro quo.” In this situation, Ashe saw the big picture; it turns out that his admission to South Africa had been a bullet point in the president of the South African Lawn Tennis Association’s argument to readmit South Africa to the Davis Cup. Ashe assessed the situation like this:

They’re ahead; they’ve already hooked something very big with me as part of the bait. . . . It can work both ways though. There is a concept in international trade called comparative advantage. Two nations will trade with each other if each believes it can gain. My going to South Africa is a trade. They’ve already gained something out of me, and I’ll gain something too. If nothing else, my presence signals a pause in apartheid. In the sweep of history, a pause maybe for only five minutes — but maybe next time ten. I am banking on a trait of human nature that concessions are won with great cost, that, indeed, small concessions incline toward larger ones.

Ashe was able to place his decision to play the South African Open into its incredibly complex context. His presence would be a tool for South Africa, a bargaining point. He would stand as a shallow display of the egalitarianism that was woefully lacking in their government and a stark reminder of the profound injustice of that government. Apartheid would cease, for only a moment, but that moment would give a fourteen-year-old black South African boy the opportunity to see what a free black man looks like. In this watershed moment, the course of that
boy’s life would turn; inspired, this boy would play tennis and tennis would set him free. The boy Ashe inspired that day was Mark Mathabane, author of *Kaffir Boy*, an autobiographical account of his childhood under South African apartheid. Mathabane was able to escape South Africa with Ashe’s assistance and a scholarship earned by playing tennis.47

Though the South African government was using Ashe, he would advance his own project as well. Ashe would be part of the hammer that would smash apartheid. The interplay of Ashe as another black man restricted by a system of a worldwide white supremacy and Ashe the activist is impossible to see without engaging both the materialist and the narrative accounts of race. Narrationists recognize that people must subjectively engage race; they must confront the ghost while Materialists identify the socioeconomic conditions that shape that engagement. Our struggle with race cannot always put us on a noncontroversial path. This was a challenge that Ashe was always prepared to face.

Ashe’s early life was shaped by a host of friends and family members who prepared him for navigating race’s uneven territories. Ashe’s coach, Dr. Walter Johnson, always understood that he was not just training Ashe to play tennis; he was training him to be a black man playing a white sport with white players. The Junior Development team — the mostly black players at the tennis camp Dr. Johnson ran from his home — had some very specific rules: self-control, honor, discipline. On the court, they would be models of sportsmanship: no tantrums, considerate of other players, and respectful of judges. Johnson even taught his team to play anything that was less than two inches out of bounds. As a result, Ashe would never be guilty of the laziness, sense of entitlement, or emotional instability that is often attributed to blacks.

Ashe was, in fact, known for his “towering calm.”48 As a black man, Ashe would be expected to be the least disciplined, the most irascible; instead, he was a study in calm. His
opponents found it maddening. Johnson’s teachings, however, were not simply about winning. They were about access. Johnson knew that tournament organizers would use any excuse to exclude his Junior Development team. If they were models of good sportsmanship and behavior, they might have a few more opportunities to compete. This was early training for a lifetime project of seeing the structural features of race without losing yourself in them. Johnson’s first students had not yet learned this lesson. When they competed in the United States Lawn Tennis Association’s national Interscholastic Championships, they were “scared to death,” “slaughtered,” and “humiliated.”

A simple material restriction — preventing these young men from regularly playing in tournaments with whites — had more than material consequences. Their fear reflected a narrative that goes along with such restrictions, that says that they are inferior, that their failure is inevitable. Ashe saw that combating that narrative was just as necessary as combating the socioeconomic circumstances that created it: “When you must limit your idols, surely you must limit all the dreams and aspirations, and you remain, perforce, a limited man.”

As important as the tennis skills that Ashe picked up from Johnson was the lesson to be his own person. This is a daunting endeavor when pursued within the context of oppression. For example, Clark Graebner questioned Ashe’s “majestic cool.” “Would he have been that way if he had been white? . . . He has had to master the restraint of his emotions on the court. In fact, I think he works too hard at trying to keep his cool. . . . It’s not human to be that cool. He is penned in. Feelings need an outlet. I hope he is not going to lose his cool by trying to keep his cool.” In stark contrast to his worry that Ashe was penned in, Graebner also found Ashe “loose.”

He’s carefree, lacksadaisical (sic), forgetful. His mind wanders. I’ve never seen Arthur really discipline himself. . . . He doesn’t gut out a lot of points where he
has to work real hard, probably because he is concerned about his image. He
doesn’t want to appear to be a grubber. He comes out on the court and he’s tight
for a while, then he hits a few good shots and he feels the power to surge ahead.
He gets looser and more liberal with the shots he tries, and pretty soon he is
hitting shots everywhere. He does not play percentage tennis. Nobody in his
right mind, really, would try those little dink shots he tries as often as he does. . . .
He plays to shoot his wad.  

Graebner was of course wrong about Ashe’s discipline, but Ashe admits to being “reckless” on
the tennis courts, to trying difficult shots to thwart boredom — both his own and that of his
fans.  Penned in, but reckless. Cool, but out of his mind. Superficially, Ashe was a bundle of
contradictions; more contradictions are found in Ashe’s politics.

Some have described Ashe’s politics as “moderate”; in direct contrast to contemporaries
like Billie Jean King that may have seemed true. After all, he was decidedly against militant
black activism and staunchly advocated self-discipline over affirmative action. However, he
was also arrested on multiple occasions for protesting; the last time was just a few months before
his death. Ashe’s politics — like his tennis — are better described as diverging wildly. He
shifted between his commitment to relatively conservative values like self-reliance and personal
responsibility and much more radical agitation against a variety of anti-black racisms — from
apartheid to the treatment of black refugees. This string of contradictions — like the statistics I
cited near the opening of this chapter — require explanation, and I think the answer can be found
in Ashe’s looseness.

For folks like Ashe, race is inescapable. He described the problem this way:

I am a prisoner of the past . . . [Segregation] left me a marked man, forever aware
of a shadow of contempt that lays across my identity and my sense of self-esteem.
Subtly the shadow falls on my reputation, the way I know I am perceived; the
mere memory of it darkens my most sunny days. I believe that the same is true
for almost every African-American of the slightest sensitivity and intelligence.
Again, I don’t want to overstate the case. I think of myself as extremely self-
confident. I know objectively that it is almost impossible for someone to be as
successful as I have been as an athlete and lack self-assurance. Still I know that
the shadow is always there; only death will free me, and blacks like me from its pall.

Here Ashe is managing yet another contradiction: his own clear self-image — a talented and fortunate man — and the shadow image projected on him by racism. This burden weighed on every decision — political and personal — shaped every aspect of his character, but it was his character, nonetheless. This is what Graebner did not understand about Ashe’s calm or his recklessness: racism, even when unsuccessful, changes who you are, but it cannot claim you unless you let it. Ashe was altered by his engagement with racism, but he was not lost to it.

When Ashe coached the Davis Cup team from 1981 - 1986, one of the greatest sources of tension between him and star player John McEnroe was McEnroe’s proclivity for profane outbursts during the matches. McEnroe’s tantrums did not hinder his play, but it was not a simple difference in style either. For Ashe, it was a matter of honor and respect. The discipline, restraint, and self-reflection that served him on the court were not just parts of a performance he put on to win matches or even to maintain access. They also were more than just what racism had made him. Ultimately, that was who he chose to be. Ashe was not “penned in.” He was Ashe.

Navigating the minefield of race requires, in a word, grace; by his persistence, his insistence on respecting his choice, Ashe modeled that grace. He looked at the systematic oppression of blacks around the world and saw himself in them. He felt the shame, the self-doubt, and uncertainty of being “marked” by race, but he did not succumb. He insisted, for himself and others in his position, on pride and individual initiative. He believed that despite the many obstacles they face, blacks must stand on their own feet. The genuine “looseness” in Ashe was his flexibility, his willingness and ability to see beyond himself without losing himself. He could see the larger social structure, oppression, and its effect on him and still recognize and
maintain his sense of self, his spirit. He took ownership of the personal and political contradictions that life as a black man entailed. He modeled courage, strength, and integrity to millions of people whether they were fans of tennis or not. He always believed he was obliged to try to be more than just a tennis champion, but through his grace, he elevated himself and tennis, making being a tennis champion so much more.

**You’ve Got to Push**

I will conclude by further characterizing the unique metaphysical position on race that Ashe’s life reveals. Racism is undeniably real. People are denied access to housing, education, employment, and a host of other social goods because they are identified as being members of various racial groups. They are told explicitly and implicitly that their needs are less important and that they have less moral and legal standing than whites. These denials and restrictions — and the threat of them — shape how these folks make their way in the world. They may struggle against stereotypes, reject racial identification, protest against racial injustice, or cleave to those with whom they share racial identity traits. All of that is real. It all must be tended to if we hope to live in a just society. The questions that arise in tending to all the effects of racism seem to point to common concepts: race concepts. The challenge undertaken in this chapter is to pry open these concepts. When you look inside “black,” however, you will find no biological components that definitively connect all the folks who are called black by someone. You also will not find a continent, nation, principle, project, economic status, education level, or cultural ideal that unites all those who are called black by someone.

The flaws of materialist and narrative constructivism reveal that race concepts inevitably point back to projects like racial justice and authenticity. Materialists identify race in ways that serve examining and rectifying the socioeconomic consequences of racism. Narrationists
identify race in ways that serve the project of trying to engage authentically with life within a
body marked with the traits and features of race. Race, itself, is empty; it is only the projects that
are real. Over time, more and more people will see race for what it is: a set of projects whose
ultimate goal is to see the end of race, an end to both the socioeconomic injustices of white
supremacy and the personal identities and attitudes developed to manage those injustices. In the
meantime, we must engage earnestly and enthusiastically with those projects, giving ourselves
the leeway — the looseness — to slide our definitions as necessary. I will give Ashe the last
word. He was commenting on the pursuit of racial justice, but it applies just as aptly to this race
project: “Progress and improvement do not come in big hunks, they come in little pieces. . . .
You’ve got to push. You’ve got to act as though you expect it to come tomorrow. But when you
know it’s not going to come, don’t give up. . . . We’ll advance.”

I would like to thank Steve Patterson for getting me involved in this project; it has been
intellectually stimulating and inspiring in ways that I did not anticipate. I am also grateful to
Robert Schroer for comments that helped me worked out my ideas.

2 I do not mean to suggest that no one thinks about the racial ramifications of whiteness; my
point is that for many people’s ordinary lived experience race only matters for people of color.
3 My discussion of race, especially of issues of authenticity, will tend to focus on answering
these questions for and about African-Americans to the exclusion of other people of African
descent and other people of color; it also focuses on characterizing and clarifying race in the U.S.
to the exclusion of other nations. While I think the kind of project undertaken here could be
equally useful for other racial groups in other nations, ultimately, the details are likely to be
different. Certain groups would have to make issues of language difference and language loss
more central in their story, while others would need to make religion and cultural identity more
central to theirs.
October 29, 2008) and "Hewitt – Blake Racial Incident." October 13, 2001. Online video clip:
5 This was Lleyton Hewitt’s defense of his behavior during his 2001 U.S. Open match with
James Blake. The worry here is that he presumes that the fact that he comes from a multiracial
country is evidence that he could not be racist. Cf. “Hewitt caught in race row.” BBC Sports,
(accessed on October 29, 2008).
My contention here is that the most public discourse on race — that available on television and some major newspapers — lacks sophistication, avoids complexity, and often does more harm than good. Not all discourse on race, however, suffers from these weaknesses.

Cf. Joel Stein, Jennie James, and Amanda Bower, “The Power Game,” Time 158, no. 9 (2001): 54-61, for a discussion of Navratilova’s remarks and this recent article on Williams, Associated Press, “Women’s tour CEO reacts to Richard Williams’ remarks on racism,” CBS Sports, March 20, 2008, http://www.sportsline.com/tennis/story/10725357 (accessed on October 29, 2008). It is not my contention that Richard Williams is subtle in his opinions about race. I cannot help but worry — alongside authors like Ralph Wiley in his Why Black People Tend to Shout (New York: Penguin, 1992) — that part of the reason for his outrageousness is that there is little willingness to carefully examine the role racism may play in the bizarre treatment to which the Williams family has been subject over the years.


Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 41. This is just one particularly pithy characterization of oppression; in reality it is a complex phenomenon that has been carefully thought considered by a number of thinkers, cf. Sandra L. Bartky, Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression (Routledge, 1990); Ann E. Cudd, Analyzing Oppression (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Marilyn Frye, The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory (Crossing Press, 1983).


Appiah actually distinguishes between two different types of racism: Extrinsic racism occurs when people use their racist views to justify giving different moral standing to different racial groups. Intrinsic racists apply different moral standards to different racial groups regardless of whether or not they can identify essential moral differences between those groups. Intrinsic racists are, on Appiah’s view, implicated in a more significant moral failure than are extrinsic racists. Cf. Appiah, “Racisms,” 5-6.

To be more specific, there is at least as much genetic variation within racial groups as there is between them, and the genes (traits) that are supposed to be unique to particular racial groups turn out to be distributed outside those groups. The website “Race: The Power of an Illusion” — maintained in concert with the documentary of the same name — includes an exercise in sorting people that both anecdotally and more substantially demonstrates the dispersal of various traits across racial boundaries; cf. Larry Adelman, PBS, “Race: The Power of an Illusion - Sorting People,” PBS.org. http://www.pbs.org/race/002_SortingPeople/002_00-home.htm (accessed May 15, 2008).

Racial population naturalism — another option for those who reject racialism — attempts to establish a biological foundation for race. It continues to reject the idea that we will eventually
identify sets of genes that are only present in particular races. Instead it argues that races are biological groups resulting from periods of reproductive isolation. Thus, when I say that some woman is black, I am claiming that she is a member of a group that is (or was) reproductively isolated from other groups that I would identify as white or Asian, for example. While racial population naturalism offers a viable biological alternative account of race — one whose criteria has a hope of being met — it faces two major challenges. First, there is serious doubt as to whether human populations were ever reproductively isolated enough to create biological distinction; even if there was sufficient isolation, it is doubtful that such isolation has persisted into contemporary society. The second challenge concerns whether the biological populations produced by reproductive isolation correspond to the populations currently identified as racial groups. In other words, there may be a racial group (or more than one) resulting from the reproductive isolation of sub-Saharan Africans, but they may have little or nothing to do with the group of folks that we call “black” right now.

At the very least we need to be able to coherently discuss groups who have suffered or continue to suffer injustice in virtue of having been misidentified as members of racial groups.

What I’m calling narrative constructivism is more often called idealist constructivism, and describes views suggested and defended by DuBois, Thomas, and Outlaw.

The quotes can be found in Mills, “But What Are You Really,” 48–49 and 49, respectively. I will be using the slightly awkward construction “Narrationist” — with a capital “N” — through the remainder of the chapter to refer to narrative constructivists and the less awkward construction “Materialists” to refer to material constructivists.

Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press: 1997). This particular materialist constructivist account of race has been widely criticized. Whether Mills’ account of constructivism is accurate or not is irrelevant to this argument.


There are other reasons to worry about materialist constructivism. In its eagerness to explain the social structure that oppresses people of color it may dehumanize them. I worry that viewing the problem of race as fundamentally a socioeconomic problem risks making people into mere cogs in a machine, that this perspective is profoundly disempowering. I focus on the assignment problem, because I consider it an internal critique. While most materialist constructivists do not share my concern that their position is dehumanizing, they will be worried if it turns out that materialist constructivism does not accurately map the groups of people who are oppressed in virtue of race.


I reject some of the parameters of Ashe’s thought experiment here. I believe the criticism that affirmative action serves to advance unqualified or under-qualified people leans heavily on racist and sexist beliefs that populations served by affirmative action — e.g., blacks and women — could not be qualified for certain jobs or as qualified as their white and male counterparts. This disagreement does not undermine the important point I think Ashe does make.

This series of quotations all occur in Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, 152.
In the interest of full disclosure, I admit Ashe regularly discouraged talented blacks from relying on affirmative action because of his personal commitment to self-reliance and rather classically conservative criticisms of affirmative action as degrading to those it is intended to help. However, Ashe also did not hesitate to offer personal and material assistance to blacks in need. I think this suggests that part of what motivated Ashe was the recognition that understanding race requires a finer brush than what strictly material analysis provides.

Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, 236.


Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, 126. Most materialist constructivist accounts allow that ideals or discourse plays some role in race; my concern is about the very small degree of significance placed on these more abstract aspects of race.


Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument,” 73-74. Appiah’s contention is, in fact, that in the absence of a legitimate ideal through which all blacks can be united, Du Bois falls back on a racialist account that explains the connection between blacks in terms of “common blood.”


Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, 130.

Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument,” 75.

It is important to acknowledge that historically, we have found it much more difficult to see race as a complex social system. We are much more inclined to see race from the perspective of individuals. No doubt, part of the explanation of this tendency is that seeing race from the
perspective of individuals can often serve to preserve the status quo, for example, making housing discrimination about one or two bad apples and ignoring its connection to white flight and urban decay.

44 Ashe, *Days of Grace*, 105.
45 Ashe and Deford, *Arthur Ashe: Portrait in Motion*, 107.
50 Ashe and Deford, *Arthur Ashe: Portrait in Motion*, 108.
54 Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, 35.
55 His opinions on black militantism can be found in McPhee, *Levels of the Game*, 144. His rejection of affirmative action occurs, among other places, in Ashe and Rampersad, *Days of Grace*, 147–153.
58 Ashe, *Days of Grace*, 60-100.