Deck Lee and the Location of The Professor in Post Soul Literary Plots

Charlie Gleek
Comparative Studies, Florida Atlantic University

DRAFT COPY-PLEASE DO NOT CITE
The Ubiquity of the Post Soul Professor

The professor character is no stranger to readers of contemporary African American literature. Academics, and academia writ large play a variety of vital roles within the plots and settings of novels which fall under the banner of what Trey Ellis coins as the “New Black Aesthetic” and Bertrand Ashe names as “post soul” literature.¹ The genre is home to stories of peripheral professors: the creative writing faculty member at Boston University who fawns over Gunnar’s poetic prowess in Paul Beatty’s *White Boy Shuffle* and the ironically tangential Bernard Boudreaux Junior in Emily Rabateau’s *The Professor’s Daughter*. Post soul professors serve as provocateurs: Dorothy, the archetype cultural mulatto in the metafictional narrative within Ellis’ *Platitudes*, the Judith Butler-flag-waving faculty at UC Berkeley who eggs on D’Aron and the other ‘Little Indians’ in T. Geronimo Johnson’s *Welcome to Braggsville*, and the deceased but omnipresent James Fulton, founder of ‘Intutional Theory’ which drives the plot in Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*. There are also parental professors in post soul fiction: protagonists Thandi and Birdie each experience on-off-on again relationships with their professorial male parents in, respectively, Zinzi Clemmons’ *What We Lose* and Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*. Finally, there are the principal professors: the central characters of Thelonious “Monk” Ellison in Percival Everett’s *Erasure* and Chris Jaynes in Mat Johnson’s *Pym* face existential crises as academic professionals whose act of personal reinvention is at the heart of the narrative and serve as a critique of wider literary and scholarly culture. Consequently, the variety and ubiquity of a professorial character across a range of post soul fictional novels is not simply a curiosity to comment on, but phenomena available for critical interrogation.

¹ See both Ellis (1989) and Ashe (2007).
The Professor in the Post Soul Plot

What follows is an exploration of the location of Deck Lee’s character in Danzy Senna’s novel *Caucasia*. The term ‘location,’ refers to the physical locations where Deck Lee appears in the plot, what Deck does in those spaces and whom he does things with. The central argument of this analysis is that Senna’s character of Deck Lee is emblematic of the complicated ways that professors appear in post soul literary representation, and thus work against tropes of the narrowly-articulated absent-minded or exclusively-scholarly professor in popular culture. Moreover, this analysis of Deck Lee points to an approach to study professorial characters that are ubiquitous in post soul literature, one that could theoretically inform debates about how the complexities of African American life correspond to contemporary literary characters. Despite regularly being criticized as an “overintellectualized creep,” a myopic academic by friends and family members throughout *Caucasia*, Deck Lee never actually spends lengthy time conducting research, does not log long hours teaching or commenting on papers while ignoring his family, or is off engaging in public service away from members of his social network inside of the narrative. Ironically, Deck’s physical presence in the text is anything but academic, as he occupies domestic and community spaces and engages in parental, familial, sexual, and friendship relationships: all hallmarks of a well-rounded character and the antithesis of a stuffy pedagogue. It is through the analysis of where Deck Lee physically is over the arc of the novel, in conjunction to what he says or how he is described by others, that produces a rich conception of the professorial character for readers of *Caucasia*. The complexity of Deck’s character has the effect of complicating any representational stereotype of the professorial character for the reader,

\[2\] Senna 394.
and thus serves as an example of the variety and indeterminacy of literary characters that are emblematic of post soul literary production.

One of the interesting absences in the reviews and scholarship surrounding *Caucasia* is any discussion of either the professor character or the locational dynamics of the novel’s plot. Ignoring, or perhaps not primarily considering, Deck Lee is not necessarily surprising, after all, he is a supporting character in light of Birdie’s coming of age narrative. Tangential characters, especially parents of a story’s protagonist, also deserve to be considered as the primary object of literary analysis. A review of scholarship on *Caucasia* in the MLA International Database reveals that the academic work on Senna’s novel is primarily centered on the protagonist Birdie, as well as on subjects of identity, passing, and other race-related themes; plot analysis or the consideration of geography and space in particular, save for Moore’s examination of familial movement, is absent from the literary criticism of *Caucasia*. Additionally, there is little consideration of views other than Birdie’s in the scholarly critiques of *Caucasia*; a gap that this analysis seeks to fill.

One of the hallmarks of post soul literary texts which feature a professor as a character is the overlapping similarities of authorial experience, narrative form, and character position to the protagonist within the plot. *Caucasia* is Senna’s debut novel, putting the text alongside similar inaugural narratives which feature professors in some aspect of the plot as in *Long Division*, *Platitudes*, *The Intuitionist*, *The Professor’s Daughter*, *What We Lose*, and *White Boy Shuffle*. Senna’s academic background -- an MFA from the University of California, Irvine -- puts her in

---

relative company with many of these same authors who hold advanced or terminal degrees from leading universities and have collegiate teaching experience on their *curriculum vitaes*. It follows that Senna has the authority to draw on her lived experiences as a woman in the late-20th and is likely familiar with the intricacies of academia, as well as the myriad of labor, familial, social, and cultural tensions which are part and parcel to academic life; knowledge that likely manifests itself in the character of Deck Lee. Indeed, one of the under-appreciated aspects of trying to find a center of literary production that falls under the banner of the New Black Aesthetic may be that the writers of such work come from successful experiences in higher education and transfer their knowledge and familiarity with American tertiary education by incorporating a professor character into their respective novel’s plots.

*Caucasia* is a *Bildungsroman*, centered around the coming of age story of Birdie Lee; daughter of Deck and Sandy and sister of Cole. The rise of the *Bildungsroman* corresponds to the emergence of social and cultural modernity, suggesting that the development and proliferation of this form of the novel reflect underlying socioeconomic trends. The African American *Bildungsroman* traces to the middle of the 20th century, reflective of changes in migration and population dynamics and socioeconomic status of African Americans and the corresponding outgrowth of the Harlem Renaissance which marked a change in the forms and subject matter from earlier African American literary production which was dominated by slave narratives, spirituals, work on race, class and other non fictional discourse. Early African American *Bildungsromans* include the notable examples of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Wright’s *Native Son* and *The Invisible Man*, Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and

---

4 Moretti (1987)
Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. It is worth recognizing that *Caucasia* sustains the tradition of the African American *Bildungsroman*, along with contemporary novels such as Beatty’s *White Boy Shuffle*, Clemons’ *What We Lose*, Ellis’ *Platitudes*, Johnson’s *Welcome to Braggsville*, Laymon’s *Long Division*, Raboteau’s *The Professor’s Daughter*. All this is to say that if the African American *Bildungsroman* reflects the changing material and social conditions in African American culture, then it is not surprising to find the character of the university professor emerging in African American literary production as large numbers of African Americans entered into university studies as well as the academic profession in the latter half of the 20th century.

*Caucasia* both connects and distinguishes itself from post soul *Bildungsromans* in that the professor character is the protagonist’s father. While Birdie Lee’s father Deck’s research program on the construction of race and racism aligns more closely with that of Chris Jaynes’ stalled scholarship in Johnson’s *Pym*, Deck’s position as the protagonist’s father in *Caucasia* is more analogous to that of the professor-turned-administrator in *The Professor’s Daughter* and *What We Lose*. Yet while these latter two novels are both *Bildungsromans* with female protagonists and fathers as professors, both Clemons’ and Raboteau’s professorial parent characters are critically absent from their respective novels’ rhetoric and plot. Deck’s academic position is more in line with struggling-to-be-recognized theoreticians in *Pym* and *The Intuitionist*, distinct from both the failed writers in *Platitudes* and *Erasure* as well as active academics in *White Boy Shuffle, Welcome to Braggsville, What We Lose*, and *The Professor’s Daughter*. Consequently, *Caucasia* is a fruitful site for analysis insofar as the text is a unique assemblage of authorial authority, novelistic form, and relationship between the and professor
character and the protagonist of the story which allow for a sustained examination of the location and representation of the professor archetype within the narrative structure.

**Introducing Deck Lee**

Deck Lee is an African American Associate Professor of Anthropology at Boston University\(^5\) who studies, teaches and writes on race and racism. Educated at Harvard, where he met his future wife Sandy, Deck is the father of both Birdie and her older sister Cole. Deck’s extended family consists of a deceased mother,\(^6\) as well as an older sister Dottie (Dot) who cycles in and out of *Caucasia’s* plot. Deck’s circle of friends is also relatively obscured from the narrative, although the reader is introduced to, “his sidekick, Ronnie Parkman”\(^7\) and later to his girlfriend Carmen,\(^8\) after Deck and Sandy break up in the first part of the novel.

Senna positions the reader rather early *Caucasia’s* plot to see the character of Deck Lee as a man not only weighed down by his intellectual project, but one that is burdensome to those around him. The dialogue around and about Deck, as well as a good portion of Deck’s own rhetoric in *Caucasia*, centers on academic Deck’s work and his underlying preoccupation with racism and white supremacy. While a content analysis of a digitized corpus of *Caucasia* would offer a more precise analysis of the thematic elements of Deck’s speech and the way he is spoken about, a general reading of Senna’s character points the reader towards the notion that he consumes himself with his intellectual project. For example, the reader first encounters the cerebral nature of Deck’s character in the back room at Dot’s house during a party as Redbone quips, “Maybe you should get your head out of them books and put some action behind those

---

5 Senna 60.
6 Senna 8 and 100-101.
7 Senna 9.
8 Senna 89.
high-falutin’ theories of yours.” Here, the reader gets a glimpse of how people in Deck’s social network view Deck’s outlook on life and interactions with others. This critique of Deck’s cerebral preoccupations is perhaps most acutely framed for the reader during a critical argument between Deck and Sandy where she rails, “Shit, Deck. The FBI is trying to destroy everything we’ve fought for. And all you can think about are the origins of the word ‘Negro.’” Both Redbone’s and Sandy’s comments work to frame Deck for the reader as a man who occupies himself with ideas at the expense of those around him. The reader rejoins this characterization of Deck towards the end of the text, as Ronnie describes their encounter in San Francisco International Airport years later to Birdie: “he was always...a little intense about his ideas. Well, girl let me tell you, your pops was more obsessed than ever. With his own highfalutin’ ideas about color and class and all that shit. He wouldn't talk of anything else. He didn’t seem to notice how I had changed until about ten minutes into our conversation-or, I should say-his conversation.”

Birdie recounts depictions of her father as a narrow-minded intellectual, channeled largely through Sandy’s characterization of her husband. Birdie tells the reader of Sandy’s depiction of Deck as, “intellectuals like him were parlor-pink creeps who never really practiced what they preached. At least, she bellowed at him, she was trying to do something to change the world, not just writing about it” Here, the reader sees the representation of Deck’s entrenchment in the world of letters is a hindrance to facilitating the social change he is constantly advocating for towards anyone who will listen to him. This portrayal of Deck as

---

9 Senna 16.
10 Senna 18.
11 Senna 354.
12 Senna 22.
locked in the ivory tower is not limited to disagreements with Redbone or Sandy; this is also how Birdie views him through her mother’s eyes. Birdie informs the reader that, “My mother said that my father was paralyzed with ‘the weight of his intellect.’ ‘That’s the tragedy of your father,’ she told us one night. ‘He thinks too much to be of much use to anybody.’”\(^{13}\) It is one thing for the reader to get a depiction of Deck from his antagonists in Redbone and Sandy, it's quite another to hear such a description from the novel’s protagonist, even though Birdie’s reliability could be called into question as she foregrounds the *Caucasia*’s plot with, “This is what I remember.”\(^{14}\)

Deck’s rhetoric also points the reader towards this conception of the professor character as a narrowly-focused intellectual in the advice Deck seemingly gives to everyone in the narrative, perhaps best exemplified in his comment, “You should really look at my book again. It explains everything.”\(^{15}\) Deck heaves stinging critiques towards both the adult women he partners with in the story. Deck chastises Sandy for turning her back on the lessons she learned at the most prestigious of universities, “You belong in the Square, just where I found you, Sandy, no matter how much you try and fight it. You’re a Harvard girl at heart.”\(^{16}\) The subtext of Deck’s comment is that Sandy’s movement from the world of letters --a world where Deck feels she belongs --is tantamount to a departure from their shared life together. Deck later parallels this critique of his romantic partner towards Carmen, explaining to Birdie that, “She’s long gone...We didn’t have much in common, you know. She didn’t care about ideas. She just wanted the comfort of life.”\(^{17}\) The preceding evidence certainly points to reader to see how academia and

\(^{13}\) Senna 22-23.
\(^{14}\) Senna 1.
\(^{15}\) Senna 27.
\(^{16}\) Senna 25.
\(^{17}\) Senna 395-396.
intellectual life is both a predominant feature of Deck Lee’s worldview, as well as how others view him in *Caucasia*.

This general reading of Deck’s dialogue and other’s commentary and critique about the professor character in *Caucasia* can easily lead to the conclusion that Senna’s character is relatively one-dimensional and unsophisticated. Yet Deck Lee is anything but a flat character in the plot or a simple scholarly archetype. Rather, by exploring where Deck appears in the plot, who he engages with in these spaces, and what Deck and others do as shared experiences, this analysis will show that the professor character of Deck Lee behaves in complex and sophisticated ways that informs the reader’s understanding of Deck Lee and works in parallel with one of the major thematic elements of *Caucasia*; that of migration. This analysis concludes my by suggesting that the adoption a middle ground between computational literary analysis and close reading can point the way for an enhanced criticism and interpretation of post soul literature.

**A Network Theory of Post Soul Plot Analysis**

This analysis rests on the premise that the comparison of character archetypes can shed light on otherwise covert or under-analyzed plot structures and thematic representation in these novels by highlighting the location and actions of characters within the narrative space. This approach to the character of Deck Lee loosely aligns to Moretti’s “Network Theory, Plot Analysis” model of comparative literary analysis. Moretti’s framework reads novels through the interactions characters have with other elements of the text; be it space, other individuals and

---

18 Moretti’s argument about the graphing and mapping of literary characters originally appeared in 2011, building upon ideas proffered in Moretti (2004), and also appeared with modifications in Moretti (2013) 211-240, and is extended in Moretti et al. (2017).
entities, or any thing in the text which exerts influence on the plot. The model presumes that the insights gleaned from this analysis are both reliable and generalizable, meaning that the work could be extended across a range of texts in order to discern a clearer picture of both character archetypes, in this case, that of the academic professional, but also any variety of character found in the genre: the single mother, the unhomely child, the disenfranchised professional, and more. Moretti’s framework is one which could theoretically provide some analytical order to the complicated and fuzzy genre of contemporary African American literature, the New Black Aesthetic. However, Moretti’s approach to analyzing plot generally works by analyzing large corpora of text, a method that has both its theoretical and practical limits especially in an essay such as this. Rather than abandoning the insights and perspectives that computational literary analysis can contribute to the study of post soul fiction, this works also draws on Drouin’s middle ground approach to synthesizing the use of digital humanities tools with close readings of the text.

Places, Spaces, and Actions

Social Network Analysis (SNA) envisions networks as visualizations of a story’s plot. Here, characters are vertices (nodes) represented within the network space and interactions between things --people, places, objects, and more --are represented as edges (lines). The value of analyzing literary plots and characters through SNA is that it makes all aspects of the plot appear regardless of narrative time. For example, while the events in *Caucasia* transcend space

---

19 Both Ashe and Lott discuss the complicated nature of defining what constitutes Ellis’ definition of the New Black Aesthetic.
20 Drouin (2014) 110-111
21 Moretti (2011)
22 Moretti (2014) 215-217
and time across the 1970s and 1980s, locating the plot points around geographic locales allows the reader to identify connections between characters, objects, and more as a visual snapshot. SNA is also useful for then identifying subregions of the story’s plot structure, which again serve as opportunities for comparison and contrast. The events in *Caucasia* where Deck Lee is involved take place in homes, cars, and other locales in these cities emerge as spaces for analysis by linking characters and their actions to locations in the narrative. Such spatial analysis also points to where Deck Lee is not present, therefore revealing ways in which his character’s influence on the plot is limited. In other words, the use of SNA to depict a novel’s plots opens up ways of seeing the range of stories presented in a text, especially those not centered around those of the protagonist. Finally, establishing a model for character analysis within a plot structure allows for a degree of replication, or comparison, across texts. While the model outlined below analyzes only Senna’s *Caucasia*, there is no reason not to think about the application of such a framework towards understanding each of the professorial representations across the range of post soul literature.

This analysis begins by identifying all of the geographic locations identified in the plot of *Caucasia*: a cartography for the novel. These first maps locate each of the characters (vertices) in the story line and connect them by edges to specific geographic regions. Deck Lee’s positionality to the overall plot structure and narrative arc emerge in these first series of maps. The second range of maps in the model parses out each geographic locale where Deck Lee is present in the story. These maps highlight linkages vertices of specific spaces and people

---

23 Moretti (2014) 217
24 I use Kumu, an online digital humanities tool designed to assess information and influence flows in social networks, to construct unweighted visual representations for each map in this essay.
between edges, as well as Deck’s actions in these spaces, creating a network of professor-centric social interactions in each space. Places, spaces, actions; the analysis of each both reveals the position of Deck Lee within the plot, but also points towards a tentative conclusion that there is no archetypal representation of the academic professional in post soul fictional literature; a conclusion that reinforces Ellis’ and Ashe’s shared conception of the emblematic complexity of the New Black Aesthetic.

**Professorial Places**

Events in *Caucasia* occur in several places across the arc of the plot. The greater Boston area, including the towns and neighborhoods of Cambridge, Jamaica Plains, Roxbury, and Southie, is the site of the storylines in the first portion of the story. It is in Boston where the reader meets the Lee family, including Deck, and their extended network of family, friends, and acquaintances. Brazil emerges as the second place within the plot structure, as Deck, Carmen, and Cole flee abroad in pursuit of Deck’s research project and in advance of the looming Lee family legal crisis, although Deck’s, Carmen’s, and Cole’s actions in Brazil only peripherally described by Deck after he returns to the United States and are only speculated about by Birdie Lee during her time in New Hampshire. This uncertainty of the Lee family’s time in Brazil complicates the plot structure for the reader, for while Deck, Carmen, and Cole’s move to the land of *Ordem e progresso* impacts the plot and the character of Birdie in profound ways, the life events of Deck, Carmen, and Cole remain outside of the reader’s understanding of the larger Lee family story. The next part of the plot moves to upstate New York and then to New Hampshire, as Birdie and Sandy Lee, adopting the respective pseudonyms of Jesse and Sheila Goldman while on the run, encounter new characters and thus build a second spatial network in the plot.
Caucasia’s final locational setting shifts to the west coast of the United States, some five years after the Lee family split up. Birdie reunites with Deck who is living in Oakland, who then travels to Berkeley to find and live with her sister Cole at the conclusion of the novel.

Figure 2 is a cartography of Caucasia, along with the people who live in these places. This map locates Birdie Lee as a vertex at the center of the model, connected by edges to all of the places in the plot. Deck Lee --located below and to the right of Birdie’s vertex --connects to the people and the plot as a result of living in Boston, Brazil, and Oakland. However, the reader comes to see the extent to which Deck Lee is physically isolated from portions of the plot though simply a matter of locational analysis. As shown in Figure 3, Deck is primarily connected to the story through his presence in Boston, and later Brazil (outside the plot arc) and finally in Oakland. Deck is not wholly divorced from Caucasia’s plot during Birdie’s time (as Jesse Goldman) on the road in upstate New York and in New Hampshire. Indeed, it is Birdie’s longing to reconnect Deck and Cole that drives her decision to leave the Marsh’s farm, reconnect with Dot, Ronnie, and her grandmother Penelope, and then travel to California to locate Deck’s whereabouts. In this way, developing a cartography of where Deck is considered or spoken about, rather than just physically present, would likely shed additional light on his location in Caucasia’s plot; perhaps a natural extension of this analysis in a future project. It is also worth noting that Deck is only cartographically connected to Birdie in their shared time in Boston and briefly in Oakland. Deck’s relationship with his other daughter Cole is connected through Boston and Brazil, but not in their time living in separate, but proximate cities in northern California. As for Deck’s romantic partners; Carmen and Sandy connect through their shared history and

25 See Appendix.
26 See Appendix.
experience in Boston. However, Deck and Sandy’s breakup allows for the introduction of Carmen to the plot; an element of the plot that will see Deck share space with her in both Boston and Brazil, but not in Oakland.

**Active Spaces of the Professorial Partner, Parent, and Friend**

Having established a basic map of *Caucasia’s* places, I now turn to the spaces in which Deck physically interacts with other characters within plot. Figure 4 represents the various spaces that Deck is present in and or connects to other figures and aspects of *Caucasia’s* plot. For simplicity’s sake, these maps exclude excluded spaces from this map such as the Marsh Farm or Birdie’s school in New Hampshire even though Birdie herself thinks and speaks about Deck while she is there. The maps also exclude both the coffee house in Berkeley where Birdie reconnects with Cole and Cole’s apartment in Berkeley because Deck actively chooses not to enter into those spaces. However, the maps do include the Nkrumah school and the home of Penelope Lodge --Birdie’s grandmother and Sandy’s mother --in Figure 4 as a way of highlighting the distance Deck has between those spaces and the people who act there, even though they are all within the greater Boston locale.

Reading Figure 4 reinforces a close reading of *Caucasia* insofar that Deck features prominently in a variety of plot spaces. Rather than think about the story arc of *Caucasia* in linear terms, Figure 4 can be read to see that despite Deck’s absence from the events which take place in the middle section of the plot, Deck is at the center of action in much of *Caucasia*. Deck closely connects to his daughters in this graph, reflective of their relative proximity in the visual representation of Figure 4. where as Sandy and later Carmen are further removed from the spaces

---

27 See Appendix.
in the plot where Deck is physically present. The reader easily understand Deck’s absence from Penelope Lodge’s home as a result of his separation from Sandy, this making the geographically-proximate but familially-distant Cambridge further afield from Deck’s social center. Deck is unconnected from the Nkrumah school that both Birdie and Cole attend as a result of Sandy’s controlling choice to be responsible for the Lee girls’ education at the expense of Deck’s wishes.  

Figure 5 narrows the locus of attention towards the spaces where Deck is physically present and the people he interacts with in these spaces. Several categories of spaces emerge in reading Figure 5: domestic, transportational, and public. Deck lives in three homes in the plot-aside from the aforementioned time in Brazil which is outside of the narrative. Deck shares a brownstone home with Sandy, Cole, and Birdie in Boston. It’s safe to say that the Lee family home is best characterized as a battleground, mirroring Boston writ-large in the summer of 1975, “We could hear our parents fighting through the heating vent. Muted obscenities. You pompous prick. You fat white mammy.” The reader learns that arguments and violence are commonplace in the Lee home, “That night, there was the sound of flesh hitting flesh, cries and shrieks and doors slamming. The house seemed to shake with their combined rage at each other. I whispered to Cole: tempa mi walla stu. This was their worst ever.” While there is some allusion to a sense of affection and cooperation in the history of Deck and Sandy’s relationship, Birdie informs the readers that, “Even when they were getting along, their union seemed fragile.”

---

28 Senna 23, 41.
29 See Appendix.
30 Senna 7.
31 Senna 23.
32 Senna 19.
The Lee family brownstone also tangentially connects Deck, through Sandy, to her collaborators Linda and Jane, as well as the interloping Redbone. Redbone himself is interesting to consider from a spatial perspective, as he interacts with Sandy at the Lee home, Deck at Dot’s party, and Birdie at both Dot’s party and the Nkrumah school. The fact that the Lee home is open to outsiders is a source of friction between Deck and Sandy, as Birdie characterizes the root of her parents’ fighting as, “It always came back to the visitors.”\(^3\) Birdie leads the reader through the anonymous variety and nature of the visitors to the Lee home in this early portion of the text, reinforcing the reading of the ‘Boston Home’ node in Figure 5 as not an exclusively private space for the Lee family.\(^4\) Indeed, Deck comes to see the brownstone where Sandy, Cole, and Lee live as “contaminated,”\(^5\) a place where Sandy was raising Cole and Birdie in a “kind of chaos.”\(^6\) Thus, by focusing on the spaces where Deck interacts with other characters, the reader comes to see Deck as not simply an Anthropology professor focused primarily on understanding and conversing on highfalutin topics, but a person who is embedded in a culture of disorder and domestic violence who then seeks a way out this space through by changing his location.

Figure 5 allows us to see how Deck’s spatial movements limit the interactions he has with people in different home spaces. Birdie describes Deck’s move to from the Lee home in vague terms as she gradually introduces the reader to the fact that Deck is living in Roxbury.\(^7\) The reader is also never given entre into Deck’s Roxbury residence, exemplified by the fact that Birdie and Cole routinely meet their father in his car outside of the Lee family brownstone. It is

\(^3\) Senna 20.
\(^4\) Senna 20-22.
\(^5\) Senna 55.
\(^6\) Senna 6.
\(^7\) Senna 14, 31, and 53.
only Carmen, as Deck’s girlfriend, who is given access to Deck in a domestic space outside of
the Lee family home, as this is where Deck may be staying when outside the Lee brownstone.\textsuperscript{38} The reader is left to infer that Carmen and Deck’s relationship in the Roxbury apartment is
amicable as they sustain their relationship from Boston to Brazil, but break up two years later
due to Carmen’s lack of commitment to Deck’s intellectual life.\textsuperscript{39} In contrast, Birdie breaks into
Deck’s apartment in Oakland, forcing her way back into his life.\textsuperscript{40} With his spatial walls
breached, Deck, albeit half-heartedly in Birdie’s remembrance of the event, smiles then
embraces his daughter and says, “So, welcome home.”\textsuperscript{41} While this homecoming and
reconnection is fraught with tension, accusations, and rationalizations, as well as Deck’s
ever-present discourse on race relations, Deck shares his domestic space with Birdie through
casual conversation and a meal. This reading isn’t to suggest that Deck Lee would win any
parent-of-the-year award for his brief time with Birdie. Rather, this spatial and action-oriented
analysis suggests that by the end of the plot of \textit{Caucasia}, Deck Lee may have not entirely
foreclosed his own personal and social space to his daughter Birdie.

Indeed, Deck never fully disconnects from social spaces in \textit{Caucasia}. The complexity of
the Deck Lee character can also be found in Figure 5, highlighting all of the public spaces that
Deck participates in with his family and his friends. Deck is clearly at Dot’s party to do more
than pick a fight with Redbone. Deck is ostensibly at Dot’s to have fun, exemplified by his mood
in the car ride\textsuperscript{42} with Ronnie, Cole, and Birdie to Dot’s apartment and in contrast to Sandy’s

\textsuperscript{38} Senna 14.
\textsuperscript{39} Senna 395-396.
\textsuperscript{40} Senna 384.
\textsuperscript{41} Senna 387.
\textsuperscript{42} Senna 9-10.
reason for not attending the party, “She (Sandy) didn’t go to parties anymore. She said she didn’t have time for boogying.” While Birdie is scornful of her father when he chooses to sit in reading in a cinema lobby instead of watching “slasher films” with Cole and Birdie, Deck takes Cole and Birdie to restaurants such as Bob the Chef’s and Aku Aku. Deck’s time with Cole and Birdie include regular trips to the Museum of Fine Arts as well as the public gardens, the place where Birdie “I felt closer to my father than I ever had before. We held hands and went on the swan rides together. There was a man selling T-shirts, and my father bought me one that said ‘Wet Paint’ across the front in raised multicolored letters that dribbled down like real paint. He took a picture of me in my new T-shirt, work over my long-sleeved one so that the long sleeves billowed out like a pirate’s.” Of course, this significant father-daughter experience is disrupted by police harassment, an event that clearly impacts not only Deck and Birdie’s relationship, but one that likely contributes towards Deck’s increasing defensiveness towards social relations in the United States.

What additional interpretations can be drawn from Deck’s gradual distancing from others in the plot? Perhaps an answer can be found in the second type of plot spaces that Deck occupies, that of transportation. Both Boston and Oakland are home to some of the robust public transportation networks of trains and buses in the United States, even it the 1970s and 1980s when Caucasia takes place. However, Deck’s preferred mode of transportation in these bustling metropolis is the car, a Volvo in Boston and an undescribed vehicle in Oakland. At a time of lengthy gas lines and staggeringly-high fuel prices in the United States, it is curious to consider

43 Senna 9.
44 Senna 55.
45 Senna 58-59.
46 Senna 59-61.
that Deck avoids public transportation --a system which would undoubtedly be used by large numbers of African Americans in the 1970s and 1980s --to move about the city in his car. Is Deck’s decision to rely on bourgeoise modes of transportation an overt effort to communicate his status as an academic? Perhaps, but nothing in Caucasia’s plot points in this direction. Deck’s time in his car --and indeed, it is always his car where he is driving --could reflect Deck’s attempt to maintain a semblance of personal control, or at the very least carve out a social space where he is at the center. Deck’s car is the site where he and Ronnie, en route to Dot’s party with Cole and Birdie in tow, “talked politics and listened to Earth, Wind, and Fire,”[47] the place where Birdie and Cole first meet Carmen,[48] and the venue where Deck is able to spend time with his daughters free from the tensions with Sandy and that of the Lee brownstone. Thus, while Deck’s rhetoric towards the people he interacts with during the novel reflects an offensive engagement with topics of racial tension and conflict in the United States, the spaces he chooses to occupy in the text points towards an ever-increasing defensive posture towards the people in his social network. This distancing is likely a function of several events occurring in Deck’s life: disruption of his home space by Sandy and her militant colleagues, the end of his marriage to Sandy, the necessary legal flight to Brazil as a result of Sandy’s collaboration in the Berkeley (Boston) bombing, as well as resistance on the part of other characters in the plot to listen or acknowledge Deck’s intellectual pursuits[49] What is made clear from a spatial analysis of Deck Lee in Caucasia is that he is not so one-sided so as to operate exclusively in an academic domain. Rather, Deck’s

[48] Senna 89.
[49] For example, Deck complains that, “All those Negroes in the academy publish the same old drivel every year, talking the same tired talk year after year, and nobody wants to hear something new” (Senna 301).
movement within the plot arc of *Caucasia* can be seen as a metaphor for self-segregation away from the racism and violence that is emblematic in American society, an awareness that informs both Deck’s lived experience *and* his scholarly pursuits.

**Towards a Post Soul Professor**

The reading of the Deck Lee character in Senna’s *Caucasia* through a social network of the plot points towards several implications for critiquing post soul literature. First and foremost, this analysis has hopefully shown that there is value in examining characters not simply for what they say and what they represent, but also in conjunction with their position in the plot. Elevating tangential characters alongside the protagonist opens up layers of stories that exist over the linear arc of a narrative, exposing conjunctures and connections in the text that should also lead to new questions and analysis. Specifically to the character of Deck Lee, this analysis demonstrates that the reader can find breadth and depth in a character that is at once excluded from large swaths of the linear plot, and in turn, represents ideas and connects to themes that are at the heart of *Caucasia*; including migration and identity. Deck Lee is anything but an “overintellectualized creep”; intellectually domineering and one-sided for sure, but also a man who struggles because he is embedded in the violence and racism that is part and parcel of his academic work. Deck is certainly bookish, reflected in the bibliography that Birdie references throughout *Caucasia*, but he is also committed and concerned for what little family he has. Deck explains to Birdie why the family split up: “It wasn’t just me. You’re (sic) mother was in on it too. It was a decision we made the week before we split. You’d go with her, I’d take Cole. We didn’t know whether we’d be able to meet up again. Things were dangerous then, bad as they’d ever been in Boston. Worse than it was after the Civil war. It was the only way...Man, in America, that’s the kind of decision
you gotta make." It is here, in Deck’s confession, that the reader can connect to stories of families disconnected by violence and migrating in pursuit of better lives to the plot of *Caucasia*. While Birdie’s remembrances remain central to the plot, the spaces and stories that follow other characters in *Caucasia*, especially that of Deck, are equally worthy of exploration.

A second implication of this analysis lies in how texts can be read in comparative perspective. Intertextuality is one way to see how post soul literature alludes to and disrupts representations of canonical African American texts. Comparative plot analysis offers an equally interesting and complementary way of visualizing the structures of a wide range of texts in order to parse out similarities and decisions in form, theme, and character construction. While both Ellis and Ashe are reticent to pin down exactly what constitutes post soul literature, their reading and interpretation of the field rely exclusively on qualitative analyses. Computational approaches to large corpora of text continue to offer insights into the dynamics of literary fields, “For us, the sociology of the literary field cannot rest on sociology alone: it needs a strong morphological component.” In other words, an insightful way of exploring the dynamics of post soul literature may be through the shape of literary representation and structure, and not simply through thematic representation. Analyzing traditional narrative forms such as *Caucasia* or *The Intuitionist* alongside experimental work such as *Platitudes* and *What We Lose* and all novels categorized as ‘post soul’ could lead to a sharper understanding of the shape of the genre, as well as how these novels compare and contrast against literature produced during the Black Arts movement or the Harlem Renaissance, just to posit a simple way to think about such large-scale evaluations.

---

50 Senna 394.
Finally, and related to each of the previous points, the character of the professor holds a prominent place in post soul literature. Understanding the cultural reasons for why this character archetype emerges in late-20th and early-21st century African American literature is a question worthy of further exploration. So too are middle ground analysis of close and computational readings necessary to parse out the shape and attributes of where and how the professor appears in post soul literature. As the preceding analysis has demonstrated, albeit modestly, Deck Lee is a rich and complex character, operating as a cultural mulatto working, in Ashe’s parlance,\textsuperscript{52} to trouble Blackness through a lived experience as a parent, partner, and professional. Deck Lee’s is along for the ride in Ashe’s reading of \textit{Caucasia} where blackness is on, “a journey, "passing" through different cities and spaces and identities.”\textsuperscript{53} Deck Lee wholly disrupts status quo interpretations of the significance of Black Power and other African American iconic ideas by simultaneously joking about and refusing to participate in Sandy, Redbone, and their colleague’s armed resistance while simultaneously working to deconstruct the very idea of race itself. Given this reading of Deck, and the extent to which the character personifies Ashe’s understanding of a post soul character, it seems necessary to explore the extent to which other professorial characters in contemporary African American literature exhibit the same richness and complexity of thought and action in their respective texts. The location of the post soul professor may not yet be mapped, but there is a path towards finding them and a set of intriguing questions along the way. If Deck Lee is at all indicative of the post soul professor, it’s fair to say that these professors will have lots to say once they are found.

\textsuperscript{52} Ashe 614.

\textsuperscript{53} Ashe 615.
Appendix

Figure 1: Word Cloud of Subject Terms of Scholarly articles on *Caucasia* found in the MLA International Database.


Figure 2: Places and Characters in *Caucasia*

Source: “The Professor” (Personal Project) on Kumu, 8 December 2017, [https://kumu.io/cgleek/the-professor](https://kumu.io/cgleek/the-professor)
Figure 3: Places Deck Lee Lives in *Caucasia*

Source: “The Professor” (Personal Project) on Kumu, 8 December 2017,

https://kumu.io/cgleek/the-professor

Figure 4: Spaces in *Caucasia*

Source: “The Professor” (Personal Project) on Kumu, 8 December 2017,

https://kumu.io/cgleek/the-professor
Figure 5: Deck’s Spaces in Caucasia

Source: “The Professor” (Personal Project) on Kumu, 8 December 2017,
https://kumu.io/cgleek/the-professor
Works Cited


Rummell, Kathryn. “Rewriting the Passing Novel: Danzy Senna's *Caucasia.*” *Griot: Official*

