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Daniel J. Sharfstein, *The Invisible Line: Three American Families and the Secret Journey from Black to White* (New York: Penguin, 2011), xviii + 396 pp.

The Color Line, so basic to questions of American identity and so divisive in American history and culture, turns out to be far more ambiguous, situational, and porous than we might have suspected. Daniel Sharfstein argues in his *The Invisible Line* that crossing the Color Line has been frequent and that definitions of race essential to maintaining a Color Line have been highly variable and arbitrarily determined. Sharfstein also argues that the consequences of crossing the Color Line have been ambiguous, often involving grave loss even when motivated by the desire to cast off for new opportunities.

Sharfstein, a professor of law at Vanderbilt University, is concerned especially with legal definitions of race, so a good bit of the space in this book is taken up with legislative acts and courtroom proceedings. Racial identity has been of vital importance in America, since one's place in relationship to the Color Line could open up radically different pathways to opportunity in our society. But it turns out that race itself is a social construct. Definitions of race in America have often turned on percentages of this or that ancestry, but those percentages could change according to circumstances, expanding to include or contracting to exclude people whose racial identity before the law hinged not on ancestry so much as on malleable legal definitions. But we also learn that legal definitions of race from time to time in American history have included elements not of parentage but of character, or wealth, or behavior. We also learn that on other occasions, in parts of the country localities could choose to declare people of one race or another simply because to do differently would be to incur social costs that the locality was not willing to bear.

Sharfstein has chosen to approach the complexities of legal and social definitions of race through a small group of very specific examples, the histories of three families all of which crossed the Color Line but at different times and under different circumstances. In the course of this book we get to know the Gibsons, who crossed the Color Line in their transition from Virginia to South Carolina to Louisiana in the 1700s; the Spencers, who "passed" as a result of their assimilation into an all-white community in the mountains of

western Kentucky in the 1800s; and the Walls, who moved from slavery in North Carolina to freedom in Ohio in the decades before the Civil War, then to prominence in post-Civil War Washington, DC, only to decide that it was easier to cross the Color Line than fight for their rights as African-Americans in the face of the end of Reconstruction and the spread of Jim Crow laws in the late nineteenth century.[1]

There is a sense, of course, in which each of these families followed one of the basic, and often-heralded, narratives of American history, like Huck Finn, "lighting out for the territory," taking advantage of the vastness of the United States to move on, to start over, to leave the past behind and find a new identity in a new place. To a greater or lesser extent, however, each of the families Sharfstein profiles in this book finds the saga of American reinvention to be rich with irony, with loss, with ambiguity sufficient to raise questions about just how valuable this feature of American life actually turns out to be.

The story of the Gibson family illustrates many of the ironies Sharfstein is concerned to dissect in this book. Hubbard Gibson, born in Virginia in the mid-1600s the son of a man of African background and a woman of English background, was legally white – and free – in Virginia, because at that time and in that place one took the racial identity and of one's mother. His descendants, who moved from Virginia to western South Carolina in the early 1700s, ran into another set of legal constructs when their patriarch Gideon Gibson ran afoul of South Carolina's legal system. Authorities tried to have Gibson and his family reclassified as black by the South Carolina Legislature, but the measure failed because legislators decided that if Gibson were declared to be black, "few people could make a secure claim of being white" (25). Gibson, as a slave owner and as a man of property, had showed "perseverance," and by perseverance, a legislator wrote at the time, "the black may be blanched and the 'stamp of Providence' effectually effaced" (26).

Gideon Gibson's descendants, their complex racial ancestry now firmly in the past, migrated to other parts of the South in the post-Revolutionary period, eventually winding up in Louisiana, where they prospered as large plantation- and slave-owners. Here, of course, the ironies continued to multiply. By 1850, Gideon's direct descendant Randall Lee Gibson was a student at Yale University. Later, he would be an officer in the Confederate Army; still later, he would be a US Senator from Louisiana and an architect of the end of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow. Only once – during his career as a politician from Louisiana – was he accused, by a political rival, of being "colored," a claim he was easily able to dismiss as the baseless charge of a deranged man. After all, throughout Randall Gibson's life, he was devoted to segregation, convinced that people of African descent were a race "distinct from the white race, and which has not yet the capacity . . . for the responsibilities of self-government" (218).

The Spencers, the second of Sharfstein's three families, "passed" from black to white in situations similar to the Gibsons, but had their racial identity challenged repeatedly rather than once. The Spencers were the descendants of one Jordan Spencer, a free man of color who moved from Clay County, Kentucky to Johnson County, Kentucky, a hundred

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[1] For the sake of full disclosure, I need to say that the Walls whose stories enrich the pages of this book are my relatives. Our common ancestor John Wall moved from Virginia to Anson County, North Carolina, in the mid-1700's, and had several children, including James (b. 1782), my ancestor, and Stephen (b. 1791), his brother, who was the father of Orindatus Wall. So the Walls who are the focus of much of Sharfstein's book are my cousins. Unfortunately, I have never met any of them.