Name: Date:

Racial Classification Under Apartheid

**Directions:** Please actively read the following article using the I’s &/or C’s Method. You must have five I’s &/or C’s with comments by the conclusion of the reading to receive full credit. Remember: **“I”** stands for **Interesting** and **“C”** stands for **Confusing**.

In the Apartheid state of South Africa (1949-1994), your racial classification was everything. It determined where you could live, who you could marry, the types of jobs you could get, and so many other aspects of your life. The whole legal infrastructure of Apartheid rested on racial classifications, but the determination of a person’s race often fell to census takers and other bureaucrats. The arbitrary ways in which they classified race are astounding, especially when one considers that people’s whole lives hinged on the result.

Defining Race

*The 1950 Population Registration Act* declared that all South Africans be classified into one of three races: White, “Native” (Black African), or Colored (neither White nor Native). The legislators realized that trying to classify people scientifically or by some set biological standards would never work. So, instead, they defined race in terms of two measures: appearance and public perception.

According to the law, a person was White if they were “obviously…[or] generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race of tribe of Africa.” People who could prove that were accepted as another race, could petition to change their racial classification. One day you could be Native and the next Colored. This was not about fact but perception.

Perceptions of Race

For many people, there was little question of how they would be classified. Their appearance aligned with preconceptions of one race or another, and they associated only with people of that race. There were other individuals, though, who did not fit neatly into these categories, and their experiences highlighted the absurd and arbitrary nature of racial classifications.

In the initial round of racial classification in the 1950’s, census takers quizzed those whose classification they were unsure about. They asked people about the language(s) they spoke, their occupation, whether they had paid Native taxes in the past, who they associated with, and even what they ate and drank which were indicators of race. Race in this respect was based on economic and lifestyle differences—the very distinctions Apartheid laws set out to protect.

Testing Race

Over the years, certain unofficial tests were also set up to determine the race of individuals who either appealed their classification or whose classification was challenged by others. The most infamous of these were the “pencil test”, which said that if a pencil placed in one’s hair fell out, he or she was White. If it fell out with shaking, Colored, and it if stayed put, he or she was Black. Individuals could also be subjected to humiliating examinations of the color of their genitals, or any other body part that the determining official felt was a clear marker of race.

Again, though, these tests had to be about appearance and public perceptions and in the racially stratified and segregated society of South Africa, appearance determined public perception. The clearest example of this is the sad case of Sandra Laing. Ms. Laing was born to white parents, but her appearance resembled that of light-skinned Colored people. After her racial classification was challenged at school, she was re-classified as Colored and expelled. Her father took a paternity test, and eventually, her family got her re-classified as White. In the end, the whole community still ostracized her, because she ended up marrying a Black man. To remain with her children, she petitioned to be re-classified, again, as Colored. To this day, over twenty years after the end of Apartheid, her brothers refuse to speak to her even though the designation “Colored” and all restrictions based upon it were abolished, dismantled, and abandoned.