

Elon Musk Left a South Africa That Was Rife With Misinformation and White Privilege

The apartheid era created all-white enclaves littered with anti-Black government propaganda and sheltered from the atrocities of apartheid.



By John Eligon and Lynsey Chutel

John Eligon and Lynsey Chutel interviewed 13 acquaintances or family members of Elon Musk over the course of five days, reporting from Johannesburg and Pretoria.

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Elon Musk's impending takeover of Twitter has many people probing his public statements and his past for clues about how he will shape one of the world's most influential public platforms.

But Mr. Musk, best known for owning the companies Tesla and SpaceX, has not talked much in public about a significant swath of his past: How growing up as a white person under the racist apartheid system in South Africa may have shaped him.

"It's telling — white kids were insulated from the harsh reality of it," said Terence Beney, who is white and graduated with Mr. Musk from Pretoria Boys High School in 1988.

Interviews with relatives and former classmates reveal an upbringing in elite, segregated white communities that were littered with anti-Black government propaganda, and detached from the atrocities that white political leaders inflicted

on the Black majority.

Mr. Musk, 50, grew up in the economic hub of Johannesburg, the executive capital of Pretoria and the coastal city of Durban. His suburban communities were largely shrouded in misinformation. Newspapers sometimes arrived on doorsteps with whole sections blacked out, and nightly news bulletins ended with the national anthem and an image of the national flag flapping as the names of white young men who were killed fighting for the government scrolled on the screen.

“We were really clueless as white South African teenagers. Really clueless,” said Melanie Cheary, a classmate of Mr. Musk’s during the two years he spent at Bryanston High School in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, where Black people were rarely seen other than in service of white families living in palatial homes.

Mr. Musk left South Africa shortly after graduation at 17 to go to college in Canada, barely ever looking back. He did not respond to emails requesting comment about his childhood.

Mr. Musk has heralded his purchase of Twitter as a victory for free speech, having criticized the platform for removing posts and banning users. It is unclear what role his childhood — coming up in a time and place in which there was hardly a free exchange of ideas and where government misinformation was used to demonize Black South Africans — may have played in that decision.

Classmates at two high schools he attended described him as a loner with no close friends. None offered recollections of things he said or did that revealed his views on the politics of the time. But Black schoolmates recall that he spent time with Black friends.



Pretoria Boys High School, from which Elon Musk graduated, leaving soon after to attend college in Canada. Joao Silva/The New York Times

Mr. Musk's father, Errol Musk, said in an interview with The New York Times that Elon, his brother and sister were aware from a young age that there was something wrong with the apartheid system. Errol, who was elected to the Pretoria City Council in 1972, said they would ask him about the laws prohibiting Black people from patronizing restaurants, movie theaters and beaches. They had to make calculations when they were going out with nonwhite friends about what they could safely do, he said.

"As far as being sheltered from it, that's nonsense. They were confronted by it every day," recalled Errol, who said he belonged to the anti-apartheid Progressive Party. He added, "They didn't like it."

Still, Errol offered a description of their lives that underscored how removed they were from the country's violent reality. They got along well with Black people, he said, pointing to his children's good relationship with their domestic staff, and he described life in South Africa during apartheid as being mostly better and safer than it is now.

According to a biography of Mr. Musk, written by Ashlee Vance, Mr. Musk said he did not want to partake in South Africa's mandatory military service because it would have forced him to participate in the apartheid regime — and that may have contributed to his decision to leave South Africa shortly after high school graduation.

The apartheid system created a distinction among white people, specifically between those who spoke Afrikaans and those who spoke English, like Mr. Musk's family. While political power lay with the Afrikaners — the perfecters of apartheid who descended from Dutch, German and French settlers — English-speaking white South Africans enjoyed wealth that felt to some like a birthright, Ms. Cheary said.

“We were the white, English-speaking elite of the world,” she said. “It was literally our kingdom.”

Pretoria Boys had a socially progressive undercurrent. The school's headmaster had participated in freedom struggle activities; some students would travel to anti-apartheid gatherings.

“I'm pretty confident in saying that at a place like Pretoria Boys High, you were exposed to progressive ideas, even if you didn't adopt them,” said Mr. Beney, 51, who does policy work for public health and social welfare organizations.

Yet none of them experienced the beatings and gunshots of state security forces like the Black children who were fighting for basic rights in township schools. And many students bought into government propaganda, Mr. Beney said.

Terence Beney, who graduated with Mr. Musk from Pretoria Boys High, in a hallway of the school. Joao Silva/The New York Times

He recalled a debate in one of his classes at Pretoria Boys in the mid-1980s over the government's requirement that they serve in the military, squashing efforts by Black South Africans to defeat an oppressive regime.

A slight few said they would refuse to kill on behalf of an unjust political system. But others said that while apartheid had its injustices, the country was in an all-out war. Some insisted that the fight was to protect against communists. Others justified the battle by arguing that Black people were susceptible to evil ideas.

Another common trope among students back then, Mr. Beney said, was that Black people could not be trusted with the right to vote because they had no tradition of democracy.

The apartheid system had forced the Black majority to live in certain areas. The way that was taught in school was that the country was made up of many tribes, with some opting for independence in their own homelands, according to Stanley Netshituka, who became the first Black student at Pretoria Boys in 1981.

Mr. Netshituka said he had some friends from liberal families who understood how bad things were for Black South Africans. But they were the exception, he said.

“I would say the majority were blissfully ignorant and happy to be blissfully ignorant,” said Mr. Netshituka, 54, who was allowed to attend the school because his father was a diplomat for Venda, one of the ethnic homelands in South Africa that was considered a semi-independent nation at the time.

In the same breath, classmates would call Black freedom fighters terrorists but tell him that, “Not all Black people are necessarily bad because I can see you’re not so bad,” he recalled.

Mr. Musk became friends with a cousin of Mr. Netshituka’s, Asher Mashudu, according to Mr. Mashudu’s brother, Nyadzani Ranwashe. One time at lunch, a white student used an anti-Black slur, and Mr. Musk chided the student, but then got bullied for doing so, Mr. Ranwashe said.

Mr. Mashudu was killed in a car accident in 1987, and Mr. Ranwashe said he remembered Mr. Musk being one of only a handful of white people who attended the funeral in the family’s rural village.

“It was unheard of during that time,” he said.

Stanley Netshituka, the first black student at Pretoria Boys High School, in his home in Midrand, South Africa. His son Masase (background image, right) also attended the school. Joao Silva/The New York Times

Errol Musk, who worked as an engineer, said that his family did not buy into the negative propaganda about freedom fighters, some of whom had resorted to violent sabotage to combat a regime that stripped them of political rights and freedoms like choosing where to live.

“But, I mean, we were concerned about them putting off a bomb next to our house, for example,” he said.

Errol Musk, who has been estranged from Elon, said he believed that apartheid had taught his son not to discriminate. But Elon’s electric car company, Tesla, has faced serious accusations of racism. The state of California is investigating accusations that the company allowed racial discrimination against Black

employees to flourish in its factory in the San Francisco area. Tesla was also ordered to pay \$15 million to a Black employee after a jury found last year that the company had failed to address the racism he faced at work.

Elon Musk has largely recalled his life in South Africa as traumatic and unfulfilling. Born in Pretoria, about 45 minutes north of Johannesburg, his parents divorced before he was 10. He moved to Durban on the country's south coast with his mother, but then returned to live with his father in Pretoria. They had a tense relationship, Mr. Musk has said.

At Bryanston High, where Mr. Musk completed the first two years of the five-year South African high school curriculum, he recalled being bullied heavily.

Elon Musk (front row, far left) was a member of the chess A team at Bryanston High School in 1985.
Bryanston High School Yearbook

If Bryanston High was said to be traumatic for him, Mr. Musk found more stability at Pretoria Boys, a sprawling campus fit for a Harry Potter set, with a forest of evergreens, a pond and English-revival buildings.

Some students lived on campus, while others, like Mr. Musk, commuted from home and were known as “day boys.”

The specter of apartheid was imbued in the culture. Like many other schools of that era, there was a cadet program that groomed the boys for military service. They would wear brown uniforms and do marching drills. There was a Scottish pipe band.

Mr. Musk’s current views on free speech seem to reflect the philosophies students were exposed to at Pretoria Boys, said Mr. Beney, the classmate — like that of the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, a champion of unchecked expression.

“I think his ideas about free speech are very classic liberal and not nuanced,” Mr. Beney said of Mr. Musk.

Some who knew Mr. Musk from his young days in South Africa said people should not discount the evolution he could have gone through once he left apartheid and South Africa behind. Andrew Panzera, who was in German class with Mr. Musk at Bryanston High, recalled his own transformation.

As a white student coming up in the placid Johannesburg suburbs, he never saw the suffering of his Black counterparts. That changed, though, when he did his government-mandated military service.

“People, at some point, realize that they’ve been fed a whole lot of crap,” he said. “At some point you go, ‘Jeepers, we really were indoctrinated to a large extent.’”

Mr. Musk in Chicago in 2018. Joshua Lott/Getty Images

Kitty Bennett contributed research.

***A correction was made on May 5, 2022:** Because of an editing error, a photo caption with an earlier version of this story misspelled the name of the son of Stanley Netshituka, the first Black student at Pretoria Boys High School. The son's name is Masase, not Masas. Because of an editing error, the article also described incorrectly Elon Musk's status at Tesla, Inc.. He is the owner of Tesla, not an original founder of the company.*

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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