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What Elon Musk Gets Wrong About South Africa

[EVE FAIRBANKS](#)

The tech mogul's statements about his country of origin reveal that he never really knew the place.

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There's a legend among South Africans that, if you travel overseas, people will ask if you walked to school riding a lion. That's hyperbole, but it represents a truth: the questions you get are baffling, suggesting a warped or even completely imaginary version of the country exists abroad. That version is often either a fairy tale — a place redeemed by a single smiling saint, Nelson Mandela — or a pastiche of exotic images: thatched huts, rhinoceros poachers, beaded necklaces. When I was preparing to move from Washington, D.C. to South Africa in 2009, a well-educated Europe-based foreign correspondent asked me whether the country had electrical outlets. (93% of South African households in urban areas have access to electricity.)

Nowadays, I get a different kind of query about South Africa — thanks, in large part, to the country's most famous export, Elon Musk. In July, the tech entrepreneur commented on a Florida media personality's [post on X](#) that alleged that South Africa's "black party" was encouraging a genocide against white South Africans. "They are openly pushing for genocide of white people in South Africa," [Musk commented](#), and asked why president Cyril Ramaphosa was "say[ing] nothing." The claim was a layer cake of stale myths and gibberish that few South Africans — even those concerned about white people's future in the country — bothered to amplify: The political party to which the original poster referred is not South Africa's "black party." More than 80% of South Africans are black, but the Economic Freedom Fighters hold only 11% of seats in the parliament. And the fringe allegation that black South Africans intend to massacre white people has circulated for decades, attaching itself to some new potentiality when the original theories, like that [the genocide would begin the night Nelson Mandela died](#), don't pan out. Musk's concern, however, was taken up by a range of non-South African white supremacists: Patrick Casey, founder of the Neo-Nazi Group Identity Evropa, [posted](#), "In 2016 South African white genocide was a fringe issue — now, the richest man in the world, who also owns Twitter, is drawing attention to it. Things are moving in the right direction!"

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But even those who would dismiss Musk's other posts about what's "concerning" — like that [President Joe Biden has installed a "censorship industrial complex" in America](#) or that the United States Congress [could throw Americans in jail for using VPNs](#) — take his claims about South Africa seriously because he is South African. On a trip I took to Spain in October, a

pair of left-wing literary types asked me worriedly if Musk’s assertion that white people in South Africa face an imminent risk of genocidal extermination was really true. (In reality, year after year, the group of people by far most at risk of violent death in South Africa are black men.) This isn’t the only time Musk has propagated a contrived image of South Africa. In a defamation lawsuit that went to trial in the United States in 2019, [Musk’s lawyer argued](#) that Musk didn’t mean it literally when he called a cave diver a pedophile because in his 1980s South African youth, “pedo guy” was a catch-all insult, not literal. ([South Africans disagreed](#), though the cave diver lost his case.)

South Africa is a deeply misunderstood country, and Musk’s statements thicken the clouds of misconceptions that swirl around it. South Africans so rarely take up Musk’s invitations to talk about the purported “white genocide” or whether “pedo guy” is a common insult because they seem like bullshit. But his claims about the country go much deeper. This year, Musk’s life won a treatment by Walter Isaacson, the former CEO of CNN and editor of *Time* who has profiled Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein, Henry Kissinger, and Steve Jobs. These are definitive books about world-makers, the kind that parents gift to teens curious about the world. *Elon Musk* begins with a vivid depiction of South Africa. Unfortunately, the portrait that Musk offered Isaacson is hard to believe, and nobody ought to buy it.

II.

Elon Musk was born in 1971 in Pretoria, north of Johannesburg, during apartheid, the harsh form of racial segregation practiced by the South African government from 1948 to 1994. He lived in South Africa until he was 17 before moving to Canada. There’s always been something placeless about Musk: his inscrutable accent — it’s neither North American nor South African nor even somewhere in the middle — and his restless persona. In Isaacson’s tale, Musk’s South African origins contextualize and humanize him. “As a kid growing up in South Africa, Elon Musk knew pain and learned how to survive it,” reads *Elon Musk*’s first line. The idea functions both as the beginning of a hero’s journey and an excuse for Musk’s adult brittleness. To understand South Africa, the book suggests, is to understand the cryptic billionaire.

But when I shared the portions of *Elon Musk* that relate to South Africa with a dozen white South Africans — historians, journalists, and people I know, including fans of Musk’s companies — they found them so implausible as to be laughable. Over the years, critics have accused Musk of making a myth of his

past. A Tesla co-founder [famously sued Musk for mischaracterizing himself as the electric car company's sole "creator"](#) (the [suit ended in a settlement](#)) and innumerable observers have argued that he isn't a self-made man but a [crony capitalist](#), building businesses with the help of [billions of U.S. government dollars](#). That makes it strange that Isaacson seems to have taken Musk's account of his childhood at face value. (Isaacson did not respond to a request for comment on his sourcing.) According to *Elon Musk's* endnotes, the only people Isaacson interviewed for the prologue — the chapter that deals directly with South Africa's influence on Musk — were Musk, his family members, and Peter Thiel, another billionaire provocateur who spent a few years of his childhood in South Africa and in modern-day Namibia, which was ruled by South Africa at the time.

Some things Isaacson recounts are extremely unlikely to have happened as he describes them. In the 1980s, Isaacson claims, as a young teen, Musk and his brother once “had to wade through a pool of blood next to a dead person with a knife still sticking out of his brain” while getting off a train to go to an “anti-apartheid music concert”; at these concerts, “often, brawls would break out.” But there were no explicit “anti-apartheid concerts” in South Africa in the '80s. The apartheid government strictly censored music, and bands that played songs with lyrics perceived to criticize apartheid — or even bands with members of different races — [were regularly harassed](#) and arrested. “I cannot believe the ‘knife in the head’ story,” Charles Leonard, a DJ and journalist who attended many gigs in apartheid-era Johannesburg, told me. “The concerts I attended were always peaceful.”

“The ‘wading through blood’ is invented, I’m sure,” Shaun de Waal, another Johannesburg journalist who covered 1980s South African society, said. By the late 1980s, crime in South Africa had increased significantly and by 1991 the country had one of the highest murder rates of any in the world on a per capita basis. But violent crime was far rarer in the heavily policed areas around the Johannesburg railway stations and in the white-only neighborhoods where Musk grew up.

The absence of racial discrimination is the thing many South Africans find most unbelievable about Musk's tale.

Elon Musk claims repeatedly that taking trains in South Africa was a terrifying experience and notes that Musk, who “developed a reputation for being the most fearless,” took them anyway: a train trip from the south coast to

Johannesburg was “dangerous,” and on commuter lines, “sometimes a gang would board the train to hunt down rivals, rampaging through the cars shooting machine guns.” Christopher Van, a South African train buff who helps organize a yearly celebration of the country’s railway history, took trains constantly throughout the ’80s and doesn’t remember them as dangerous at all: they were “fantastic,” he said. (All trains in South Africa were segregated by race through 1988.) To the South Africans I spoke to, the gangs-on-trains story sounded like an infamous episode Musk might have read about: [a 1990 massacre of black South Africans on a Johannesburg train bound for a black suburb](#). Whatever Musk may have experienced on trains, he had left South Africa by then.

Most everything Isaacson recounts about a 1980s white South African childhood struck the South Africans I spoke to as grossly exaggerated, warped beyond the point of recognition. Under apartheid, most white South African schoolchildren had to attend a wilderness camp called veldskool. In *Elon Musk*, Musk describes veldskool as a “paramilitary *Lord of the Flies*” in which kids were allowed, and sometimes divided into two groups and encouraged, to fight each other over small rations of food and water. Every few years, Isaacson writes, one of the kids would die at the camps and counselors told kids these grisly stories as warnings. But nobody with whom I spoke remembered hearing about deaths at veldskool. Veldskool was all about discipline, designed to prepare boys to join the military, and “fighting was discouraged,” de Waal said. (For decades under apartheid, military service was mandatory for all young white men to battle Communist-aligned fighters in nearby countries and black South African liberation fighters who’d gone to those countries to train.)

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My partner, a white South African born in 1970, participated in one of the wilderness camps and remembers a single incident of violence: a group of boys pinned down a Jewish child and drew a swastika on his forehead with a Sharpie. That memory illuminates the core obfuscation that underpins Musk’s depiction of his South African upbringing in Isaacson’s book: that there was no prejudice. “South Africa in the 1980s was a violent place, with machine-gun attacks and knife killings common,” Isaacson writes. When recounting his first night in Montreal after leaving South Africa, Musk tells Isaacson that he slept on his backpack at a youth hostel because in South Africa, “people will just rob and kill you.” But neither he nor Musk offer context for the tremendous violence he describes; it’s a mysterious mist of unknown origin. No black South

Africans appear in his biography, and while the word *apartheid* is mentioned, it is not defined as an explicitly Christian white-supremacist regime. Search for “race” in *Elon Musk* and you’ll find only one mention of race relations: a friend admiring that the adult Musk “has no biases about gay or trans or race.”

The absence of racial discrimination is the thing many South Africans find most unbelievable about Musk’s tale. Prejudice and racism were inescapable in 1980s South Africa. Your race was indicated in the digits of your national ID card. Schools were segregated. Black South Africans could not walk in white urban neighborhoods without a “pass” signed by a white employer. The wilderness camps, for example, fed on concern about the dangers that “terrorists” — as the government called black-liberation fighters — posed to white children. They also stressed general threats posed by Western liberalism — the culture that had generated rock music and free love but had also helped tear down Jim Crow in America. Danie Marais, a poet, told me that he remembers an instructor at his camp playing Queen’s “Bicycle Race” backwards “and telling us we could hear the band singing, ‘Marijuana, smoke it now.’”

For even the most apolitical white South African child, racial politics was everywhere. In a 2004 essay, Marais wrote about his childhood [memories](#) — and how disturbed he always feels when he recalls that they happened under apartheid: “It seems unlikely, almost perverse, that one’s own personal experiences of beauty and innocence could have happened in such a time and place.” Even as Isaacson depicts South Africa as a warped environment that distinctively molded its young people, he does not dwell on the nature of the pressures they were under. It’s a terrible pity, because most self-aware or honest South Africans Musk’s age recognize that apartheid’s influences on them endure well into their 50s. And a real investigation into how this real place — as opposed to a self-serving memory castle — made Musk who he is would have been fascinating.

But while Musk’s depiction of South Africa is unrecognizable to many South Africans, he is profoundly recognizable to them as a very particular kind of Generation X white South African male.

Musk and his brother Kimbal, Isaacson writes, said that “their father is a volatile fabulist, regularly spinning tales that are larded with fantasies, sometimes calculated and at other times delusional.” Isaacson writes that Musk left South Africa in 1989 principally to get a break from his dad. That

story strikes other South Africans as bizarrely incomplete. Whenever a white boy in his late teens left South Africa in the 1980s, he was *ipso facto* escaping conscription.

Over the last few years, Musk has seemed to work off the theory that if your false statements are diverse enough in content and size, and if some sound like jokes, you can develop a reputation as an admirable troll rather than as a dangerous liar. The more varied and hyperbolic someone's yarns are, the less they seem to demand or even allow for detailed factual rebuttals. In August 2018, Musk declared he had secured funding to take Tesla private, roiling the entire U.S. stock market. The [U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission charged him with securities fraud for making statements that "lacked an adequate basis in fact,"](#) and he had to step down as the electric car company's board chair. While this claim had consequences, it has since merged with more apparently harmless ones. Some are false promises, like that [he would create a content moderation council](#) for X but then never officially announced one. Others are outright, but comic, fabrications, like the time when he claimed he was in front of Mark Zuckerberg's Palo Alto house and [intended to place his testicles on Zuckerberg's face.](#) ([Zuckerberg wasn't in Palo Alto at the time, and the movements of Musk's jet suggested he was in Cleveland.](#)) Others are breezy fudges that bend the truth to his preferred reality, like when, to get out of his deal to buy Twitter, he [claimed that 20% or 33% of accounts on the platform were bots.](#) ([A study commissioned by Musk](#) found that spam and bots made up 11% of Twitter at the time.)

But while Musk's depiction of South Africa is unrecognizable to many South Africans, he is profoundly recognizable to them as a very particular kind of Generation X white South African male. Along with being repressive, apartheid was peculiar. Its leaders often justified white minority rule with incomplete or misleading rationales, like that they wanted to hold onto power to protect white South Africans' groundbreaking agricultural and technological innovations, to [resist a global communist conspiracy](#), or [to combat Satanism](#), not to retain privileges for white people. Apartheid leaders insisted South Africa was cutting-edge, the only success story on the African continent, while in fact the country was in extreme debt. Marais knew his camp instructors' purpose in playing the Queen song backwards was to render him jittery and protective of his community. But activities like these also seemed laughable to him. The South African government Musk grew up with represented an uncomfortable contradiction: it simultaneously appeared weak, even a joke, and also frighteningly, awe-inspiringly strong.

By the 1980s, a paradoxical worldview and understanding of power was considered the savvy one for young white people in South Africa to hold. On the one hand, power is lame. You should never believe the authorities and always be ready to sniff out bullshit, because much of what passes for news is fake. On the other hand, power is immensely desirable: the world ought to make you comfortable and conform to your wishes, and reframing reality to secure your position is good and necessary. The way that Musk assumes the world should see him as its protagonist, the way he exaggerates, the way he endorses a wide range of conspiracy theories ([like an antisemitic post on X earlier this month](#)) while rarely confirming that he really believes them, the way he playfully tiptoes over the edge of bigotry and then hotly denies he is intolerant — these specific assumptions and behaviors are so familiar to his white South African peers.

It's worth asking why white men brought up fully or partially in apartheid South Africa, like Musk, Thiel, and the right-wing tech investor David Sacks, have come to play an unusually prominent role in the tech-adjacent U.S. alt-right. Perhaps that white-bro-dominated sector needs advocates who were raised in an environment where they learned to espouse specific contradictions: that elites and politicians ought to support and bankroll you *and* that these kinds of people are losers who, when they criticize or regulate you, are out to get you. That certain classic power hierarchies ought to be maintained *and* that those maintaining them deserve to be seen as disruptors, even misunderstood victims.

III.

You would think South Africans would take a lot of pride in Elon Musk, celebrating him as a native son made good. But he doesn't draw anywhere near the attention in South Africa that he often commands in the rest of the world. Partly, this may be because it feels as if Musk doesn't care much about the country. When asked on X in 2020 whether he considered himself South African or American, [he said](#) "American, but born in South Africa." But the false image Elon Musk presents of South Africa — given his platform — have real effects on the country's image. I'm sure that the pair of left-wing literary types concerned about an imminent "white genocide" in South Africa are not the only ones who believe his statements. An American conservative writer recently reflected to me that Americans now use South Africa as a proxy to discuss ideas about race, demographic change, and power that they still don't quite want to discuss in the proper U.S. context. South Africans understand

this. I have lived for fourteen years all over the country — specifically, with white farming families, writing about one at great length in a recent book, *The Inheritors*. I learned to speak fluent Afrikaans. I have never heard the purported “genocide” of white South Africans discussed half as much in South Africa as it is in America.

It’s not out of the realm of possibility that these ideas will have more concrete consequences, such as decreased foreign investment or tourism. So perhaps South Africans should pay more attention to them. But seen another way, the rest of us might do well to emulate South Africans’ disinterest in the character Musk performs. Musk’s persona, in America, is a source of endless fascination, even if some of that fascination is revulsion. South Africans know his type. Personality-wise, he’s the kind of guy who is a regular at every bureaucratic meeting and every barbecue. Nothing new there, and nothing to be taken seriously. That might be the fundamental truth that takes the sting and surprise out of Musk’s bullshit.

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