

Born a Crime

Apartheid was perfect racism. It took centuries to develop, starting all the way back in 1652 when the Dutch East India Company landed at the Cape of Good Hope and established a trading colony, Kaapstad, later known as Cape Town, a rest stop for ships traveling between Europe and India. To impose white rule, the Dutch colonists went to war with the natives, ultimately developing a set of laws to subjugate and enslave them. When the British took over the Cape Colony, the descendants of the original Dutch settlers trekked inland and developed their own language, culture, and customs, eventually becoming their own people, the Afrikaners—the white tribe of Africa.

The British abolished slavery in name but kept it in practice. As the British Empire fell, the Afrikaner rose up to claim South Africa as his rightful inheritance. To maintain power in the face of the country's rising and restless black majority, the government realized they needed a newer and more robust set of tools. They built the most advanced system of racial oppression known to man.

Apartheid was a police state, a system of surveillance and laws designed to keep black people under total control. In America you had the forced removal of the native onto reservations coupled with slavery followed by segregation. Imagine all three of those things happening to the same group of people at the same time. That was apartheid.

I grew up in South Africa during apartheid, which was awkward because I was raised in a mixed family, with me being the mixed one in the family. (...) During apartheid, one of the worst crimes you could commit was having sexual relations with a person of another race. Needless to say, my parents committed that crime.

In any society built on institutionalized racism, race-mixing doesn't merely challenge the system as unjust, it reveals the system as unsustainable and incoherent. Race-mixing proves that races can mix—and in a lot of cases, want to mix. Because a mixed person embodies that rebuke to the logic of the system, race-mixing becomes a crime worse than treason.

Humans being humans and sex being sex, that prohibition never stopped anyone. There were mixed kids in South Africa nine months after the first Dutch boats hit the beach in Table Bay. Just like in America, the colonists here had their way with the native women, as colonists so often do. Unlike in America, where anyone with one drop of black blood automatically became black, in South Africa mixed people came to be classified as their own separate group, neither black nor white but what we call "colored." Colored people, black people, white people, and Indian people were forced to register their race with the government. Based on those classifications, millions of people were uprooted and relocated. Indian areas were segregated from colored areas, which were segregated from black areas—all of them segregated from white areas and separated from one another by buffer zones of empty land. Laws were passed prohibiting sex between Europeans and natives, laws that were later amended to prohibit sex between whites and all nonwhites.

The government went to insane lengths to try to enforce these new laws. The penalty for breaking them was five years in prison. There were whole police squads whose only job was to go around peeking through windows—clearly an assignment for only the finest law enforcement officers. And if an interracial couple got caught, God help them. The police would kick down the door, drag the people out, beat them, arrest them. At least that's what they did to the black person. With the white person it was more like, "Look, I'll just say you were drunk, but don't do it again, eh? Cheers." That's how it was with a white man and a black woman. If a black man was caught having sex with a white woman, he'd be lucky if he wasn't charged with rape.

If you ask my mother whether she ever considered the ramifications of having a mixed child under apartheid, she will say no. She wanted to do something, figured out a way to do it, and then she did it. She had a level of fearlessness that you have to possess to take on something like she did. If you stop to consider the ramifications, you'll never do anything. Still, it was a crazy, reckless thing to do. A million things had to go right for us to slip through the cracks the way we did for as long as we did.

Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime*, chapter 2,