

Nearly twenty years ago, when I was living in my husband's ancestral homeland of Canada, I was always well employed but never allowed to feel part of the local Quebec or larger Canadian society. Then, through a Green Paper that invited a national referendum on the unwanted side effects of "nontraditional" immigration, the government officially turned against its immigrant communities, particularly those from South Asia.

I felt then the same sense of betrayal that Mira feels now.

I will never forget the pain of that sudden turning, and the casual racist outbursts the Green Paper elicited. That sense of betrayal had its desired effect and drove me, and thousands like me, from the country.

Mira and I differ, however, in the ways in which we hope to interact with the country that we have chosen to live in. She is happier to live in America as expatriate Indian than as an immigrant American. I need to feel like a part of the community I have adopted (as I tried to feel in Canada as well). I need to put roots down, to vote and make the difference that I can. The price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation.

### FOR ANALYSIS

1. What does Mukherjee mean by "mongrelization" (para. 6)?
2. What is the "trauma of self-transformation" (para. 16)? Are there traumas felt by those who choose to remain faithful to their original identity?
3. What are Mukherjee's feelings about the culture she left behind? What does she value? To what does she object?

### MAKING ARGUMENTS

Immigration is a controversial political issue. Where do you stand on it? Should the United States make it easier or harder for immigrants to enter the country, to gain access to social services, to stay without becoming citizens, or to become citizens?

### WRITING TOPIC

Mukherjee's sister describes her attachment to India as "irrational" (para. 10), yet she maintains it. Does Mukherjee agree with her sister? Is she similarly attached to her nation, only her new one rather than her old one? Do you think feeling a deep connection to a nation and culture is irrational?

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## WHITE TRASH PRIMER 2009

You live with your mama and daddy, your two sisters, three dogs, two horses and exactly twelve cats on a farm so far from town you barely see the street lights' bright white tossed over the horizon. Your mama grows a garden of fresh green vegetables right outside your back door and you and your sisters pick peas and tomatoes in the afternoon while mama hangs clean white sheets

on the clothesline and the hot sun freckles your shoulders with small brown spots. When your daddy comes up to the house all sweating and covered in hayseed you set the table and make sure the silverware's in all the right places or you have to drink water with your dinner instead of tea.

You attend second service every Sunday since the day you are born and Brother Dan or Brother Darrell preach about the glory and grace of Jesus Christ and you accept Him as your Lord and Savior or you burn in hell and this is why you've been baptized twice and saved exactly twenty-seven times. Every week your mama and you and your sisters get real dressed up in the pretty cotton dresses she makes special for wearing to church. Your mama's always made all your clothes special with her own two hands and you are grateful for each hem until the rich kids in your Sunday School don't look at you even when you sit right next to them. Your daddy says vanity's an expensive sin but sometimes your mama drives you and your sisters to Wal-Mart anyway and she buys you underwear and socks and a pair of Lee jeans that are exactly two inches shorter than your legs and she presses her lips real tight together the whole time. One day she stops making pretty cotton dresses but the rich kids still don't look at you. They never look at you.

You and your sisters have always got on real good together. On hot summer days you pack peanut-butter sandwiches in a napkin your sister ties to your belt loop and you spend all day wandering the woods along the farm. Your daddy cuts a path with the brush hog and builds a square fort with sixteen knotty black logs instead of dragging them up to the house for firewood. You stop there every day to eat your lunch and you go skinny dipping in the creek and splash your little sister with the cold cold water and sometimes she tells your daddy and all three of you get spanked. Sometimes at night your sister comes to sleep in your bed and you stay up late talking real soft together with your heads under the covers like two peas in a pod and your daddy has to get on you for staying up past your bedtime. One night after mama and daddy are in bed your sister tells you she's moving to an apartment above the Five and Dime downtown and you pull the covers back to see her face in the dark and she says you can come to her place to see her anytime you like. The next day she takes all of her clothes out of her closet and packs them up in a big black trash bag and carries them over her shoulder out the door. Your mama and daddy holler real loud when they find out your sister is living in sin with a black man and you don't get to see her for some time.

Your daddy lets you drive his pickup truck on the gravel road to your house when he's real tired even if you're not old enough because he says it's something you need to know how to do. When you're driving he turns on the radio and listens to Paul Harvey. Sometimes he disagrees with Paul Harvey and explains to you why he is right instead of resting. Sometimes he listens with his eyes closed and his head leaned back against the window. You know he's worrying over money because when your daddy worries over money his forehead gets to looking like tilled soil, mounded in rows like the creek bottom. He works real hard on the farm but the soybeans aren't selling and neither is the corn and the fence needs repairs and the plow's all busted so you take the

truck into town without asking and you apply for a job at the fancy Wal-Mart but they don't call you to come in for an INTERVIEW. You apply six times and when they do call you pack peanut-butter sandwiches every day for lunch and every time you get a paycheck you put it in your daddy's bank and sometimes his eyes get to watering and you think he might be going soft. You save every penny you earn, but disappointment's what you get for dreaming because every penny ain't enough. Your daddy's a proud man and his eyes water the hardest you've ever seen when he signs the papers that sell the farm but this time you don't think it's cause he's soft.

You move into a white house with blue shutters and a yard with exactly thirteen trees on a paved street in town and your daddy tears down all the walls and puts up new ones cause black mold spreads where you can't see. He works at the power plant and drops his yellow hard hat by the front door and your mama waits on rich folks at the restaurant and gets real dressed up for work every night and you don't have to set the table anymore cause you and your sister eat peanut-butter sandwiches for dinner and watch cable television before you go to bed. Sometimes you cut the sandwiches into circles with the mouth of a glass and sometimes you add pink and white candy sprinkles mama keeps in the cupboard for cupcakes and you tell your sister you've made her a SURPRISE. You walk to high school every day and you smoke cigarettes and cough down the peach schnapps your mama keeps hidden in the very back of the highest kitchen cabinet and even though it burns your stomach like hell fire you follow the kids to the one-block downtown and drive your truck in circles cause it's the only thing to do. You make friends with a girl your same age and she lets you spend the night at her place sometimes and you sleep real soundly in the AIR CONDITIONING. Sometimes she sneaks her boyfriend in and they have sex in the bed right next to you. One night he brings his friend over and he kisses you and claws your clothes off and you just want to sleep but his breath is stale and sweet like the beer your daddy drinks and when you try to push him off and tell him to stop he puts a pillow over your face and jams himself right up inside you and you can hardly breathe it burns so bad but there is nothing God will do.

You try real hard to get good grades in college cause you know exactly how much it cost but you work forty hours a week at Wal-Mart and sometimes you're so damn tired you can't read the PSYCHOLOGY open in front of you. Sometimes you don't know the words in front of you but you don't have a dictionary and if you fake it your teachers always know that you are faking. Your mama calls and asks how you're doing and you tell her you're doing great, mama, just great and one day she calls to tell you she has CANCER. Your hands sweat and your knees tremble together with sixteen of your cousins and your aunts and uncles and grandparents on both sides and both of your sisters in your mama's hospital room holding hands around her bed while your daddy asks the good Lord for STRENGTH. You don't even breathe until she's waking up from surgery with her mouth pawing open and each time you look she is weaker and smaller and closer to dying and each time your daddy palms his

forehead he leaves tracks like the old creek bottom, but now you know it's not just money he worries over, so you tell him you'll drop out of school just till she's better but you don't plan to go back for some time.

You ask your mama how she feels when she picks you up from your apartment to take you to TACO BELL and she pushes you into the bathroom to show you where her breast used to be and hands you the silicon fist she keeps in her bra. You hold it with both hands. You order food. You sit down and when she's half-way through with her second SOFT TACO SUPREME you show her the pink flower tattoo your older sister bought you for your eighteenth birthday. Your mama doesn't say anything but her lips pressed real tight together tell you she is mad. Before she walks out the door and drives away she meets your eyes with hers and you know exactly what she means.

You hide that you are poor. You save up for a pair of LEVI'S jeans and put shirts on layaway. You take furniture from your neighbor's dumpster and thank your luck that they are wasteful. You fog your apartment for roaches and clean with bleach so they don't come out when you have company. You wash your car in the driveway with a hose and dishsoap. Your sister comes to visit and colors your hair NICE AND EASY 98 LIGHTEST BLONDE and paints your fingernails and toenails FIRE ENGINE RED. You make friends with a girl at work who is the same size as you and she gives you things she doesn't like anymore: a blue dress from the mall, a pair of black pumps, a pretty barrette with fake red crystals for your hair. She sets you up on dates with men and at dinner you order steaks and alcoholic drinks even if you're not old enough to drink. Sometimes you let them take you back to the fancy places where they live and if you have sex with them they take you shopping or to Springfield for the weekend and you thank your luck that they are gullible.

You act real tough but you've got a weak spot for HARLEY DAVIDSON motorcycles and a tall man in a leather coat with a broad chest and long black hair makes you want to ride. He takes you down a blacktop road clear out into nowhere and the whole time you've got that great big machine growling right under you, you're reeling in the smell of pine trees and wide green fields. So your fingers tighten on his arm. And your blond hair blows from underneath your helmet and all you can think about with the wind keeping your eyes closed tight is going and staying gone. When he stops his bike on the side of the road and turns around to hold your face real gentle between his hands you let him kiss you. And he takes you home without asking you for anything.

Your mama puts your picture in the paper when you go back to school. 10  
You take classes with black folks and brown folks and yellow folks and make friends with who you like. Your parents take you out to dinner with your sisters and when your daddy is half-way through with his second beer and his cheeks are glowing with the red blood rushing to his face he lifts his glass and says that he is proud of you. When he finishes his third beer he goes out to sleep in the car and your mama gives you three brand new black pens and a pad of POST-ITS from her purse. You study real damn hard this time cause you know this is your last earthly chance to make something of yourself and

you buy a dictionary at a yard sale and think you might learn every word if you have **DETERMINATION** and **RESOLVE**. When Wal-Mart doesn't let you off to study for a test you tell them to kiss your poor white ass and you apply for student loans and when they give out credit cards on campus you accept exactly three. Your English professor says you have **POTENTIAL** and you hold this real close to your heart when you're walking up to get your diploma and sixteen of your cousins and your aunts and uncles and grandparents on both sides and your two sisters are hooting and hollering from the stands and your mama blows an air horn and your daddy yells your name so loud and true it's like he's calling you to come up from the creek bottom. And you hear him calling for some time.

### FOR ANALYSIS

1. What significance does the title have? What does Johnson mean by "white trash"? What is a "primer"?
2. How would you characterize the **style** of the **prose** with which Johnson writes "White Trash Primer"?
3. What **point of view** is this essay written in? What effect does it have on you as you read?

### MAKING ARGUMENTS

Reflect on how you relate to the use of the word *you* in "White Trash Primer." How does it make you feel? Do you feel included by it or excluded by it? Why? Argue for or against Johnson's use of the second-person ("you") **point of view**. Cite specific moments when you feel that it is effective or ineffective, and explain why. If you are arguing against it, try to include an argument for an alternative that attempts to explain why it would have been better.

### WRITING TOPIC

Johnson's essay closes on an emotional note. Going back through the essay, note the different **tones** she creates, and reflect on how she prepares her readers for the feelings evoked by the end of the essay.

### MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. Both of these essays are in part about what Mukherjee calls "the trauma of self-transformation" (para. 16). What is the nature of Johnson's transformation? How does Johnson present it? Is it traumatic?
2. Mukherjee's essay is about immigration, while Johnson's is not. Yet both are about different ways to be in America—different ways to live, different ways to see yourself and be seen by others. Compare the situations the two treat those ways and the ways the two treat those ways.
3. Imagine