NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE
An Anthology

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Pearlma and Lewis R. Hooper

Lawana Trout
**Writing Topics**

1. Both stanzas are like a chant. Select the images you like best and use them as a model for creating a song chant about yourself. Will you use family, community, school, city, or nature images? What sounds, words, and phrases will you repeat for rhythm?

2. Write a four- or six-line poem that tells something about you, following Momaday's style, if you wish.

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**Adventures of an Indian Princess**

*Patricia Riley*

Born in 1950, of Cherokee and Irish ancestry, Patricia Riley grew up in Fort Worth, Texas. As a child, she was unaware of her Native American heritage. An avid reader of ten books a week from the bookmobile that serviced her neighborhood, she found books about Indians that bore no resemblance to the lives of her Indian neighbors and friends. She decried this absence in the introduction to her anthology *Growing Up Native American* (1993): “In the books available to me as a child, Native Americans were usually exotic, cultural artifacts from the past, the stereotypical Vanishing Americans, sometimes portrayed as romantic or noble, but always backward savages on their way out.” With the anthology, Riley rectified the fallacy for her three children and anyone interested in the “real-life experiences” of Native Americans. Riley continues to share her vision of Native American literature with students at the University of Idaho, where she is a member of the English Department.

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The dingy blue station wagon lumbered off the road and into the parking lot as soon as its driver spotted the garish wooden sign with the words **INDIAN TRADING POST** written in three-foot-high, red, white, and blue letters. Beneath the towering letters was the greeting **WELCOME TO CHEROKEE COUNTRY**, accompanied by a faded and rather tacky reproduction of someone’s idea of a Cherokee chief complete with a Sioux war bonnet. A smaller sign stood next to the large one and attested to the authenticity of the “genuine” Indian goods that the store had to offer.

The driver, Jackson Rapier, foster parent extraordinaire, assisted by his wife and two teenage daughters, had decided, at first seeing the aforementioned sign from a distance, that coming upon this place must indeed have been an act of providence. Only yesterday they had received their newest addition in a long chain of foster children, a young Cherokee girl, eleven or...
twelve years old, called Arletta. The social worker had told them that it was important for the girl to maintain some kind of contact with her native culture. When they saw the sign, they were all agreed that this trading post was just the ticket. It would be good for Arletta and they would all have a good time.

Mrs. Rapier twisted around in the front seat and looked at the dark girl wedged between her pale and freckled daughters, the youngest of whom was absorbed in the task of peeling away what remained of a large bubble of chewing gum from around her nostrils. Mrs. Rapier sighed, then tried to smile encouragingly at Arletta as she pushed tiny pins into her wispy red hair. "You're gonna love this place, honey. I just know you will."

"Yeah, Arletta," the eldest daughter said, making faces at her sister over Arletta's head. "You ought to feel right at home in a place like this. This looks like just your style."

"Just your style," the sister echoed and resumed picking the gum off her face.

Arletta looked around her, assessed the situation, and decided she was outnumbered. She knew they wouldn't hear her even if she voiced her objections. They never listened when she talked. When she had arrived at their Indian home, they had seemed to be full of curiosity about what it was like to be Indians, and all the questions they fired at her, they eventually answered themselves, armed as they were with a sophisticated knowledge of Indian people. Arletta imagined she could survive this experience. She had survived a great many things these last two years. Her father's death. Her mother's illness. An endless series of foster homes. She was getting tired of being shuffled around like a worn-out deck of cards. All she wanted right now was to take her home. She knew her mother must be well by now and probably trying to get her runaround from the welfare office as to her daughter's game in town, and she felt compelled to play along. She arranged what she knew would pass for a smile on her face and said nothing. Behind the silent mask she ground her teeth together.

The midsummer sun blazed off the shiny chrome hubcaps someone had nailed to the trading post door and reflected sharply into their eyes, making them unbearable. Mr. Rapier was the first to brave the thick, heated air. He wiped almost immediately upon leaving the car. He adjusted the strap that held his bag and waited while his wife and daughters quickly emerged from the car and made their way with swift steps to a battered red Coke machine that stood beside the trading post's open door.

Arletta hung back, squinting her eyes against the brightness. She had no interest in the trading post and was determined to stay outside. Off to the left of the Coke machine, she saw a tall, dark man suddenly walk around the side of the building leading a flea-bitten pinto pony with a blanket draped awkwardly across its back. Arletta had to laugh at the way he looked because a Cherokee, or any other kind of respectable Indian, wouldn't dress like that on his worst day. Before her mother's illness, Arletta had traveled with her throughout the United States, dancing at one powwow or another all summer long. She knew how the people dressed, and she learned to recognize other tribes by the things they wore as well. This man had his tribes all mixed up. He wore a fringed buckskin outfit, with Plains-style geometric beadwork designs, a Maidu abalone shell choker, and moccasins with Chippewa floral designs beaded on the toes. On his head was a huge, drooping feather headdress, almost identical to the one pictured in the sign beside the road. Arletta noticed that there was something else not quite right about the way he looked. His skin looked funny, dark and light, almost striped in places. As he came closer, she could see that the dark color of his skin had been painted on with makeup and that the stripes had been made by the sweat running down his face and spoiling the paint job. Arletta had never in all her life known an Indian who looked the way this man did.

After buying everything they wanted, the Rapier family came spilling out of the trading post just in time to be impressed by the cut-and-paste "Indian."

"Oh, Arletta," Mrs. Rapier said. "Look what you found. A real live Indian! Go on over there like a good girl, and I'll have Jackson take a nice picture of the two of you together. It's so seldom you ever see one of your own people."

Arletta froze. She couldn't believe Mrs. Rapier was serious, but then she knew she was. Mrs. Rapier and her entire family actually believed that the man they saw before them was a bonafide Cherokee chief. What is wrong with these people? she thought. Can't they see this guy's a fake?

Mr. Rapier walked behind Arletta and put his sweaty hands on both her shoulders. For a moment, she thought he was going to give her a reprieve, to tell her that she didn't have to do this, that it was all just a joke. Instead, he pushed her forward, propelling her toward the man with the rapidly melting face. She knew then that they were giving her no choice.

Mr. Rapier arranged the girl and the costumed man in what he thought was a suitable pose and stepped back for a look through his camera. Dissatisfied with what he saw, he turned and walked back into the trading post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return minutes later with an enormous rubber tomahawk, a bedraggled post to return 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“Smile real big for me, honey,” he said. “And say the magic word. Say Cherokee!”

Mr. Rapier grinned, his pale beady eyes twinkled at his clever remark. Arletta felt her mouth go sour and a strange contortion of pain began to move around in the bottom of her belly.

The costumed man took her hand and squeezed it. “Come on now, honey. Smile for the pitcher,” he said. His breath was stale rye whiskey and chewing tobacco. Standing next to him, Arletta could smell the pungent sweat that rolled off of him in waves, making his paint job look even worse than he had when she first saw him. Her stomach felt as if she’d swallowed an electric mixer, and she bit her lip to keep the burning in the back of her eyes from sliding down her face. Through her humiliation, Arletta glared defiantly at the man behind the camera and stubbornly refused to utter Mr. Rapier’s magic word, no matter how much he coaxed and cajoled. Finally the camera whirred once like a demented bumblebee and it was done.

Mrs. Rapier dabbed at the perspiration that puddled in her cleavage with perfect, Jackson,” she said, “You got her real good. Why, she looks just like an Indian princess.”

Appeased by his wife’s esteem, Mr. Rapier bought everyone a round of cold drinks and then shepherded Arletta and his rapidly wilting family back inside the closed-up car was stifling. The superheated being walled up alive in some kind of tomb. The syrupy soda that had been stomach. She took off the hideous turkey feather headdress and dropped it, deliberately, Arletta removed the cheap beaded medallion with its crude beads and stepped onto the floor of the car. Slowly, dering of a thunderbird from around her neck. Her fingers trembled as she medallion over, she read the tiny words printed faintly on the shiny vinyl

“Mr. Rapier, could you stop the car?” she said. “Mr. Rapier, I don’t feel so good.”

Mr. Rapier adjusted the knob on the air conditioner’s control panel to high and drove on without acknowledging that Arletta had ever spoken. He where he and his wife kept the captured images of all the foster children they stubborn expression of her. He wanted to put it next to the one of the little African clothes standing next to that papier-maché lion at Jungle World. Non-soaked hair with jerky, irritated movements. She looked at Arletta in the

“Arletta,” she said, “you need to hush. You’ve just worn yourself out from the heat and playing Indian. You’ll be just fine as soon as the car cools off.”

For an instant, Arletta pleaded with her eyes. Then she threw up all over the genuine Indian goods: “Made in Japan.”

“Arletta!” Mrs. Rapier screamed. “Look what you’ve done! You’ve ruined all those lovely things we bought. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

Arletta flashed a genuine smile for the first time that day. “No, ma’am,” she said. “No, ma’am, I’m not.”

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. The author establishes the tone for the entire story with details of the setting. What images contribute to this tone in the first paragraph? Find other adjectives in the description of the Cherokee trading post.

2. The narrator reports the words, actions, and some of the thoughts of the family and Arletta. Is the narrator more favorable to one character than to others? What does the author accomplish by using this point of view? Do you think the narrator is too obvious with the use of prejudiced images?

3. Which character seems the most real? Make a list of details about what you know and don’t know about that character. Select lines that reveal qualities of the character, such as Mrs. Rapier’s exclaiming, “A real live Indian!”

4. What is significant about the family’s having a “chain of foster children”? With three or four of your classmates, improvise a scene in which you are trapped in an event from which you desperately wish to escape. First, decide the plot conflict; then add necessary characters and dialogue.

**WRITING TOPICS**

1. Imagine you are one of these characters in the trading post scene: Arletta, Mr. Rapier, or the fake Indian chief. In your character’s voice, write a first-person view of the scene.

2. Recall vivid details of a time when you encountered prejudice. Use dialogue and dramatic description to set the scene and reveal the personalities of the people with you.