My first thought for this assignment was that I wanted you to start working with what we call “secondary” sources: articles and books that are about what we usually call the “primary” texts – that is, the books themselves. I’ve changed my mind about that a little bit: I do still want you to do some secondary reading for this assignment. But I don’t want you to feel like you have to subordinate your own reading of the text to somebody else’s, or appeal to experts in order to make a point.

The trick to academic writing – and by that I mean the writing academics actually do and publish, as opposed to “literature papers” people write only for classes, and only because somebody told them they had to – is to understand that you never read alone. You read always in the company of other readers, and what those readers think and write about books can be helpful to you in focusing your own thoughts. In real life, academics don’t read secondary materials because they are written by experts, or because we want to prove we know how to use footnotes – we read them because the arguments made by other people about the books we’re interested in can help us to clarify our own thinking about those books.

So that’s how I want you to approach this assignment. Start by choosing a book you’re interested in from among the books we’ve read. Think a little bit about what interests you about it – and think especially about what puzzles you about it, what needs explaining in it. Then, go to the library. Use the references the research groups have given us as a guide, and start doing a little reading about the book. Download two or three articles written about it and just sit down somewhere and read them. Don’t go into them looking for quotations to use or looking for some particular idea. Just read them, and find out what people talk about – and what they can talk about – when they talk about the books you like. Make note of whatever seems interesting or useful. Make note, especially, of places where the articles help you to see something you didn’t see at first in the primary text, or helped you to understand something you did see but just couldn’t get.

When you’re done reading, you’ll probably have a much better idea of what’s possible than you did when you started out: that’s what reading the secondary material does – it gives you a sense of how you can talk about a book and what contexts make that book interesting and understandable. So it’s entirely possible that when you’re done reading the articles you’ll already have some good ideas you want to write about. But if you don’t, or you need a little nudge, try one of these:

- Many of the books we’ve read involve “mixed-blood” characters. Write a paper in which you choose one such character – Joe or Mary or Louis in Stay Away, Joe, the narrator in Winter in the Blood, Archilde in The Surrounded, just about anybody in Love Medicine – and try to explain what his or her “blood” means to him or her. What is the relationship between the white/American world and the “Indian” world?
What happens to a person, for good or ill, who must figure out a way to live between those worlds? (Keep in mind that each of the writers we’ve read would probably answer those questions differently, so which character you choose will probably affect how you come out on the issue.)

• Write a paper in which you try to explain to somebody outside our class the significance of the final scene in *Winter in the Blood*.

• Start with a title for a paper: call it “Indian Mother.” Then write a paper in which you help us understand the complex relationship of Archilde with his mother, or the narrator of *Winter in the Blood* with his. (*Love Medicine*, obviously, would work here as well. But you’ll probably want to pick just one relationship.)

• All of the books we’ve read up to *Love Medicine* were written by men, but *Love Medicine* is written by a woman. Write a paper in which you try to explain, by comparing *Love Medicine* with some other book we’ve read, how and why reservation life looks different through a woman’s eyes than through a man’s.

• Write a paper in which you try to explain to somebody outside the class what “love medicine” is, and why it’s important, and what it’s for.

• Write a letter from Louise Erdrich to D’arcy McNickle, telling him what you think of his book. Then write a letter from McNickle back to Erdrich in response. (Variations on this might address the first letter to James Welch, or might have James Welch write the first letter to Erdrich. The idea, though, is to try to embody first one writer and then the other.)

• Using one – or at most two -- of the books we’ve read, write a paper where you examine the role of “Native American tradition” modern Indian life. Is the “tradition” alive, dead, or somewhere in between? Is it lost? If it is lost, can it be found again? Should it be?

OK, that’ll do for now. Remember, if you use one of my assignment prompts, that the prompt is meant to disappear – it’s a starting point, but once the paper becomes yours you should follow where it leads. Remember also that you may use secondary materials here – and in most cases it would help to do so. Quote them if it’s helpful to do so, paraphrase them if it helps you to make a point. If you use somebody else’s idea, supply a footnote so we can find it ourselves if we need to. But remember, above all, that the paper is yours, regardless of how much research you do. Don’t let anybody else take it away from you.

Finally, if you decide to write about something other than the prompts above, please let me know as soon as you can what it will be. If I can help you with it, I will.