In this time when people are estranged from the source of their food, and when chronic diseases including diabetes, heart disease, and cancer are rampant, Native elders echo a common message: “Your culture is your medicine. If you want to be well, eat your native foods, for they feed your body and they also feed your spirit.” In the book Qaqamiigux, meaning “to hunt or fish for food and collect plants; subsistence,” we learn about the rich food traditions of the Unangan people from Alaska’s Aleutian and Pribilof Islands. While many books on Indigenous foods have surfaced in recent years, few have the magnitude, beauty, and completeness of Qaqamiigux. Rather than sharing recipes from an individual or small group, this book documents a community-wide movement in revitalizing food traditions. Aleut language is included along with stories, myths, photographs, contributing writers, and featured chefs. Creating a book like this is not an easy task, but the reward is that the whole community “owns” the book and uses it. It becomes a source of pride.

The Unangan have the longest and most difficult history of contact with foreigners among Alaska Native peoples because of their unique geographical location. The first part of the book explores the historical, environmental, and socioeconomic factors that have led to an increased reliance on store-bought foods and the development of barriers to utilizing native foods. Helping younger generations understand this story and the choices we make about what we eat is an important part of healing generational trauma. Environmental contaminants and food-borne illnesses are also covered along with useful recommendations for safe food handling and preparation.

The second part of the book details over 60 types of marine mammals, fish, birds, caribou and reindeer, plants, and tidal foods. Seasonal harvest diagrams offer a visual representation of foods eaten throughout the year. Methods for harvesting and preparing, nutrient information, and recipes are included. Easy-to-read charts compare the nutrient density of native foods versus contemporary foods. For example, just three ounces of seal meat provides the same amount of iron as 24 hotdogs or 68 chicken nuggets! While you may not need to know how to butcher caribou or harvest nagoonberries, many of the featured foods are found throughout Alaska, British Columbia, and the United States.

Qaqamiigux is a testament to the gifts of the Unangan people, and it will serve to perpetuate their cultural wealth into the future. The community-based model used to develop the book, along with the beautiful format, will help other Native communities create their own successful traditional food resources. I recommend this book for students pursuing studies in Native science, nutrition, community health, and tribal food sovereignty.

Elise Krohn, M.Ed., is a fellow in ethnobotany and ethnornutrition at the Center for World Indigenous Studies, and author of Feeding the People, Feeding the Spirit.
By Lori Lambert
Salish Kootenai College Press (2014)
256 pages
Review by Wesley Thomas

Published by Salish Kootenai College Press, Lori Lambert’s new book is much needed in the academy by all Indigenous students and faculty alike. Currently, there are a handful of publications available which approach our Indigenous paradigms, but the total volume is quite limited.

For generations, our ancestors have been conducting research as part of their daily lives, which Lambert describes. At times, we are questioned by the Western academy on where and from whom we receive our traditional knowledge. Of course, they are our parents and grandparents. It is an oral, cultural knowledge handed down from previous generations.

Lambert’s book is one spokes-wheel rod attached to the centralized topic of Indigenous research. Other contributions include works by Linda Tuhwiwi Smith, Bagele Chilisa, Margaret Kovach, and Shawn Wilson. Similarly, there are works like Theorizing Native Studies, edited by Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, and published by Duke University Press in 2014.

In several publications, including this book, the word “alternative” shows up repeatedly. It is odd that we, as Indigenous people, use this particular word as a reference to our own academic work. We need to move on to the point where we give valued credit to our own research and not talk about it as an “alternative” form of academic work.

Decolonizing Western academics in our communities begins with Indigenous research methodologies. Now we need to take it a step further, which means writing our Indigenous academic works in our own tribal languages. This process would provide the ultimate and true meaning of what Indigenous research is. Sadly, many of us do not have access to our own tribal language. But from the process of doing Indigenous research we can definitively determine what is Indigenous research. There has to be a specific means of communication among Indigenous academics to announce that they are doing Indigenous research.

It is wonderful to see the work of Dr. Lambert among the writers on Indigenous research methodologies. There certainly is a need for more and the current listing of publications by the authors noted above should be required reading for all researchers at higher education institutions in North America, and for that matter in the global academy.

In the end, this book is thought-provoking and challenging. That is always a good thing, even if the reader does not end up agreeing with everything they read.

Doug Brugge, Ph.D., is a professor of public health and community medicine at Tufts University School of Medicine.