

Who am I? Javed Sommers, a settler who has lived on Treaty 6 territory for more than twenty years, in Edmonton, but have only begun relatively recently to learn about treaty. My interest in treaty came about from learning two things:

First, colonialism is alive and well; it is not just the “history” most settlers have been led to believe it is; it is a contemporary reality.

Second, the answer to dismantling colonialism on this land clearly lies in Treaty 6.

I learned the last point from First Nations I was working with, and it led me to study Treaty 6 at the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, where I graduated two years ago with a Master of Arts.

Some settlers assume only First Nations can be experts on treaties, and this is a natural assumption, because First Nations have a rich culture of remembering and thinking and talking about treaties that for the most part we don’t have as settlers. But, treaties include settlers as much as they do First Nations, and we need to learn and study and think about treaties just as much. We should never stop learning about treaty, because treaty should be understood as dynamic, not static.

Four important points about Treaty 6 and how it relates to land are:

1. Treaty 6 is *not* a text. Scholarly consensus now recognizes that treaty is best understood as what was orally negotiated 145 years ago. While oral version of treaty proves more challenging to study, we do have access to knowledge about what was negotiated through a variety of sources, including 10 individual primary written accounts from Government of Canada employees, and from the rich oral history that is alive and well in First Nations communities, and some of this can be accessed easily through books such as Harold Cardinal and Walter Hildebrandt’s *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan*. Ultimately, the conclusion of most scholars is that the treaty as was negotiated here is *not* identical in terms of what made it into the text. Some of what was negotiated is in the treaty text, and some is not, and some of what is in the treaty text was *never* discussed. This last point is especially important in terms of thinking about land, because the scholarly consensus is that there was no discussion about surrendering land, even though that language is in the treaty text.
2. What was the spirit and intent of Treaty 6 as originally negotiated if it isn’t adequately captured in the text? I put a lot of work into this as a graduate student, and I came up with this sentence. Consistent with nation-to-nation relationships in this territory for generations prior, Treaty 6 created ongoing, dynamic, nation-to-nation relationships between Canada and adherent First Nations that were intended to ensure **mutually-beneficial** relations in a **shared space**.
3. Shared space includes land and resources. Prior to treaty, it was very normal on this land for nations to live alongside each other and share the same land and resources, even as they often also had space that was more exclusively “theirs.” We should

understand Canada to have joined this context, not replaced it, with treaty; the idea of particular space “reserved” for First Nations or for settlers is not necessarily inconsistent with treaty, but for the “rest of it”—most of it—we need to understand it as shared space.

4. If we are going to live out the vision of Treaty 6, settlers need to rethink how we think about land and resources; clearly, for First Nations, treaties are inclusive of not just human relations, but also relations with non-human beings, including land, water, etc. We have a lot to learn in this regard from our Indigenous siblings because I believe we as settlers were also invited to relate to creation in this way.

Three points for further action/reflection:

1. Learn—hard to overemphasize the need to educate ourselves on an ongoing basis, as the TRC calls us to; we need to learn the history, certainly; more importantly, we need to learn the present: colonialism is alive and well today, it is not only a “legacy;” and we need to relearn ways of relating to land and other non-human beings.
2. Take responsibility for our role as settler individuals, families, communities—too often we blame the “government,” “the churches,” “them” as the issue; we need to look in the mirror and realize *we are* the government, *we are* the churches, *we are* the “them”—how do I benefit? How do my actions (and inactions) perpetuate colonialism, dispossession, betrayal of treaty? We could probably ask ourselves these questions daily.
3. Talk about sharing land and resources—disrupt narratives, challenge settler assumptions about land ownership, property rights, etc.; normalize what is right now ‘radical.’ It is only when a critical mass of settlers demand change that government will take truly decolonial action.

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Prepared for the ***Decolonizing Ourselves: Land and the Spirit of Treaty*** event at Fort Carlton, SK on August 7, 2021.