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The Impossible Truth and Reconciliation of Canada's Birth Evacuation Policy

In 1892, the federal government of Canada established the birth evacuation policy, which remains in effect today. The policy mandates Indigenous women and birthing people who live on reserves or in remote communities leave their communities, families, support, culture and traditions, and await the birth of their child and postnatal care in urban medical centres. While the stated goals of evacuation are improved maternal health care and birth outcomes, Indigenous groups and the medical literature have criticized evacuation for decades, as deeply harmful with long-lasting impacts on Indigenous children, parents, families and communities.

This paper contextualises Canada's biomedical model of maternal healthcare and asks whether meaningful efforts at decolonization and reconciliation can be made while birth evacuation policy remains in effect. Despite public awareness and education campaigns, national inquiries and reports into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and Truth and Reconciliation, birth evacuation continues Canada's project of colonialism through the politicization of Indigenous women's bodies and a biomedical model of birth and maternal health. This paper highlights Indigenous-led efforts to repatriate birth to Indigenous communities through traditional midwifery and birthwork, and argues for a strengthening of these efforts through the centring of Indigenous women and birthing people's experiences and voices. I argue that Canada cannot meaningfully call for Truth and Reconciliation without attending to the underlying colonial agenda and subsequent harms of birth evacuation policy. As a mother, doula, feminist, and settler scholar, my research calls for collaborative work between Indigenous and settler scholars, activists, and community members, that strengthens Indigenous-led efforts to counter the harmful effects of birth evacuation policy and repatriate birth to Indigenous communities.

I am first year PhD student in the Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies Department at York University in Toronto, Canada who is based in North America's most easterly point in St. John's Newfoundland. I am a mother of three. I've had a longtime personal and academic interests in thinking about motherhood mothering from feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives that are informed by undergraduate and graduate work on young mothers, psychoanalytic training, and my own experiences of early teenage pregnancy and mothering. I'm also a musician who's had the pleasure of playing my songs across Canada, the U.S. and Europe.