

Reproductive technologies rarely escape controversy. Test-tube babies. Cloning. They were both seen by detractors as unnatural, unethical, ungodly even: if not abolition, then tight regulation was a must. Now, gestation itself might no longer require a womb. PhD student Claire Horn has been grappling with the legal implications of “artificial wombs” for two years, drawing upon an intellectual journey that encompassed literature, gender studies, and law, taking her from McGill to NYU, and now to Birkbeck Law School in London.

Artificial womb technology reached a milestone in 2017, when scientists developed lamb fetuses in so-called “bio-bags”. The nickname is clinical and perhaps irreverent, but accurately describes the unnerving pictures Claire showed us at her interview: transparent plastic bags with the fetus clearly visible. They evoke sci-fi film scenes: precise rows of pods signifying humanity’s cold, motherless, future.

What makes Claire’s research so timely is that sci-fi could become reality: bio-bags are soon to be trialled with human fetuses. The implications of human *ectogenesis* will go beyond the legal, possibly impacting our self-identity (fetuses gestated in bags could unsettle women’s child-bearing role), or even disenchantment with how we come to exist.

It is within this multi-faceted context – ethical, sociological, and philosophical - that Claire is looking at artificial womb legislation in Canada, the UK, and the US. The goal is to use Canadian approaches to inform ethical debates in the UK. She draws upon fields such as bioethics and feminist legal studies to examine issues such the impact

on abortion law if gestation occurs outside the mother’s body, or the knotty question of who bears responsibility for an abandoned fetus. Artificial womb technology is not fully realised for humans, but Claire is, according to her supervisor, “prescient” in leading the call to think about these issues.

Given all this, it is both fortunate and fortuitous that someone with Claire’s drive and intellectual acumen is leading the way. After making the Dean’s Honour List at McGill, she gained a solid base for her research by doing an MA in Gender & Legal Studies at NYU (which included a stint as a Research Fellow at their Global Research Center in Prague). Furthermore, Birkbeck Law School is famed for critical legal studies (philosopher Zizek is a near constant presence at their popular seminar series). That she was awarded their extremely competitive Warrington Scholarship is a testament to their strong belief in her research and intellectual abilities.

Claire’s extensive extracurricular activities complement her research. She has organized a conference on Motherhood and Incarceration, been an active part of research network MaMSIE (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities Identities & Ethics) and been a visiting scholar at the Reproductive Sociology Research Group at Cambridge.

Canadian policymakers and bioethicists will struggle with the reality of artificial wombs, and Claire’s research includes the invaluable task of compiling best practice recommendations. As artificial womb technology develops, it feels we must all closely follow her thought-provoking research.



Claire Horn  
Photo: Rory Holwerda