

**Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences  
Research Seminar Program 2021**

**Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> August (12-1pm)**

**To be held via Teams Meeting**

**Dr. Sarah Bendall**

Sarah A. Bendall is a Research Fellow at the Gender and Women's History Research Centre in the Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences. She is a material culture historian whose work specialises in the gendered and embodied experiences of dress, particularly those of women, as well as the roles of gender in the production, trade and consumption of global commodities and fashionable consumer goods between 1500-1800. Her first book *Shaping Femininity: Foundation Garments, the Body, and Women in Early Modern England* is forthcoming with Bloomsbury in November 2021. Prior to joining ACU, she was a McKenzie Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne. Her current research examines the widespread use of whaling products in dress and decorative arts between the years 1500-1800 to explore the complex historical relationship between fashion, gender, global trade and the environment. She is also working on a co-edited book named *Making and Embodiment* and is developing a project on women and the garment-making trades in seventeenth-century England.



**“Wasteful, needless and unprofitable commodities”: Whalebone, Fashion and the Gendering  
of Commodities and their Value**

During the sixteenth century the increased availability of materials derived from whaling revolutionised fashion in Western Europe. For over 400 years the unique flexibility, strength and malleability of whalebone and whale fins (baleen) made it popular in manufacturing, particularly in women's dress. Early modern whaling has been the subject of numerous historical studies focused on the political and economic history of this natural resource in relation to oil. However, the trade in baleen remains largely understudied. This paper presents a case study of the “whale fins project”, a proposed imposition for a levy against imports of whale fins in England in 1607, which was justified by the reasoning that baleen was only used in women's clothing and was thus “a wasteful, needless and unprofitable commodity.” Using Jill Avery's theory of “gender contamination”, I show that in early seventeenth-century England ideas about the value of baleen and its trade were influenced by its use in women's dress. This presentation argues that being attentive to gender when looking at the value (real and perceived) of raw commodities in the past is vital to understanding how social and cultural factors, not just markets, influenced early modern trade. As such, I suggest that this case study has wider potential to understand the ways that trade, gender and fashion consumption functioned in the early modern period.

**For any enquiry please contact [Kathryn.Perez@acu.edu.au](mailto:Kathryn.Perez@acu.edu.au)**