

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

**Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> March (12-1pm)**

**To be held via Teams Meeting**

**Dr. Jessica Lake**

Jessica Lake is a Research Fellow at the Gender and Women's History Research Centre in the Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences. She is an interdisciplinary scholar working at the intersection of legal, cultural and social history within common law countries during the modern period, with a particular focus upon gender relations. She is particularly interested in the ways in which doctrines regulating culture and expression, such as media law and intellectual property law, shaped women's lives and in turn were employed by them to achieve social and economic change. Her first book, *The Face that Launched a Thousand Lawsuits: The American Women Who Forged a Right to Privacy*, was published by Yale University Press in 2016. It argued that women first forged a 'right to privacy' in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by bringing cases to prevent and prohibit the unauthorised publication of their images. Her book was shortlisted for the W.K Hancock Prize by the Australian Historical Association. Jessica has also published widely in academic journals, edited books and newspapers, and presented at conferences in Australia, Europe and the United States. In 2016-2017, she held the Karl Loewenstein Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at Amherst College, Massachusetts.



**Revolutionary to Regressive: Reforming the Slander of Women Across the 19th Century  
Common Law World**

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, judicial innovations and legislative reforms across the common law world, starting in New Jersey in 1788 and ending in Western Australia in 1900, enabled women to sue more easily for sexual slander. These judicial and legislative interventions – often labelled “The Slander of Women Acts” – altered hundreds of years of established defamation jurisprudence so women would no longer need to prove economic loss, so-called “special damage”, as part of their claim. At first glance such changes might seem to address merely a technical point of pleading. However, these reforms carried significant consequences for women fighting slurs such as ‘whore,’ ‘incontinent,’ ‘fornicator’ and ‘unchaste’. They were also the cause and culmination of complex debates about the social and economic status of women during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – debates that crossed counties, colonies and continents, as precedents and parliamentary proposals moved via transnational common law networks. This paper argues that what began as a revolutionary impulse to protect the virtue of the wives and mothers of the American republic, transformed into an issue of women's rights and respectability in the Australian colonies, and then into a regressive reinforcement of double standards of sexual morality in Britain.

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