Debjani Bhattacharyya
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“Profit from Storms”:
Credit, Climate and Calamity in the Bay of Bengal

This talk will explore the early history of colonial climate science and the development of an actuarial imaginary about Indian Ocean environments. Building upon a legal archive of insurance cases fought by the East India Company, ship-owners, the British Admiralty, and insurance companies in the Marine Court of Calcutta, I argue that the courtroom debates were critical in developing the correct geographical nomenclature and science of tides and winds from the latter half of the eighteenth century. By documenting how these courtroom debates became jurisgenerative sites of knowledge production about climate, my work resitutes the standard accounts of the origins of western meteorology to the littorals of the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. It concludes by showing how the Bay of Bengal, faced with the exigencies of global trade in the eighteenth-century, thus became the space of both legal and financial experimentation and subsequently a laboratory for nineteenth-century weather science.

Debjani Bhattacharyya is an assistant professor of history at Drexel University and the author of Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta (Cambridge University Press 2018) which received the Honorable Mention for the Best Book in Non-North American Urban History 2019. Most recently she was the Shelby Cullom Davis Center Fellow at Princeton University where she began work on her second book Monsoon Landscapes: Law and Climate Science in the Bay of Bengal.

Thursday 23 April 2020, 3:00—5:00 p.m.
170 St. George Street, Room 1040 (10th Floor meeting room)

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