Abstract: In 1641, an indigenous woman named Bartola Sisa discovered a silver vein while prospecting in the province of Chayanta, about 200 miles northwest of Potosí. With a loan of 300 pesos from an indigenous man, Sisa initiated the protocols of discovery: she named the site, assayed the ore, and contracted miners to extract the material after she had determined its high value. A Spaniard named Cristóbal Cotes eagerly watched this process and appeared one day with a proposal. He told her that because she was a woman, imperial law would not permit her to own the site, so he offered to register the vein under his name in exchange for a share of the profits. Bartola Sisa reluctantly accepted, but when Cotes violated the terms of their agreement by preventing her from returning to the site, she sued him for unlawful occupation of the asset. And she won.

Because Andean legend prohibited women from entering underground tunnels – animate, feminized spaces who expressed their jealousy at the intrusion of biological women by cursing a site – historians, literary scholars, and anthropologists have argued for the need to shift our view of Potosí from the mines to the markets in order to hear women’s stories. But colonial archival records prove that native and creole women did enter mines, and that when they did they made good livings as miners, refiners, and managers. This talk explains how women like Bartola Sisa used their technical literacies, or ways of knowing and speaking that were grounded in technical expertise in silver mining and metallurgy, to negotiate overlapping imperial laws and colonial jurisprudence in order to protect their production of silver. The framework of technical literacies allows us to appreciate the substantial contributions that indigenous and creole women made to the largest sector of the colonial economy, and how their unlettered work helped to shape Spanish imperial policies as they were applied in the provinces of Alto Perú.

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