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**THE RHETORIC OF RISK**  
**Technical Documentation**  
**in Hazardous Environments**

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## Editor's Introduction

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The opening paragraphs of chapter 1 of Beverly Sauer's *The Rhetoric of Risk* powerfully frame the gravity of the issues she addresses. For centuries mining has been known to be a dangerous occupation that regularly kills and maims workers. Despite almost a century of regulation in the United States, miners are still regularly killed and maimed.

Miners work in threatening, constantly changing, uncertain physical environments. Government regulation is the work of symbols, reports, regulations, and training manuals. How can the work of paper pushers affect this most embodied and bodily-threatening of labors? How can the work of symbol makers ever capture the realities of the miners, miners' judgments, and the mines? What important knowledge gets lost as the moment-by-moment physical realities of ordinary operations and moments of disaster are translated into the quiet of offices and hum of computers? How can what is learned and regulated in an office be made real, present, and meaningful in the dark of the mines? How can this process of translation from physical danger into reflective comment, rule and guideline making, and training and then back into miners' *in situ* judgement and decision making be improved to lead to a more intelligently safe practice? These are the weighty questions Sauer takes on and brings remarkable clarity to.

As editor of the Rhetoric, Knowledge, and Society series, I have had the opportunity to introduce many truly wonderful books, but none I think so graphically shows the importance and delicacy of written language in the world. The records, reports, science, and training manuals have provided ma-

for tools to develop mining technology. Mine safety texts have provided ways to reflect on practice, find shortcomings in practices, calculate possible dangers, standardize preferable practices, inform all above and below ground of useful knowledge. But mines and mining are more real and complex and unknowable than texts can yet capture and regularize. Without miners' embodied knowledge texts are incomplete and dangerously misleading. And without being integrated into miners' embodied sense of the physical world they move in, texts are of no use at the moments when they are needed, because no one can check a book as the roof of the shaft is collapsing.

Significantly, Sauer finds the fulcrum of her investigation in gesture—where embodied sense emerges into the world of representation and symbols. It is through gesture that the miners say what they sense and start to articulate those things they experience, and it is through gesture that the abstractions of the world can be brought into the material space of bodily being.

While the poignancy and importance of lives at risk give compelling meaning to Sauer's work, the book also carries significant general meanings for rhetoric and communication. The book provides a deep and complex example of the way texts enter into complex systems of material and social practice. It explores the boundary between embodied experience and abstract representation. And it starts to unpack how gesture sits between experience and representation and can inform both. In doing all these things, Sauer's book pulls rhetoric from the place of words, the *agora*, to the place where physical danger meets the complex social organizations of workers, unions, industry, government, law, engineering, and science. Although Sauer frames her argument within classical rhetoric, she implicitly challenges rhetoric to consider problems unimagined in the classical canon, even as she challenges technical communication to consider the complexly situated rhetorical nature of risk communication in the workplace.

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