Speaking the Unspeakable in Postwar Germany: Toward a Public Discourse on the Holocaust.

This fine and erudite volume traces early interventions in the German public sphere in the Federal Republic to 1970 through close rhetorical analysis of various public occasions: literary award ceremonies, university addresses, and radio broadcasts. Boos focuses on crucial moments of public performance that addressed, in terms of both content and style, the collective trauma of Auschwitz and the Holocaust that haunted the development of the two German states. The nuanced and reflective culture of memory and atonement that suffuses Germany today did not fall out of the sky, but is in many ways surprising, given the hegemonic discourse of the 1950s and 1960s that incorporated forgetting, Cold War political imperatives, and the leveling of victim status, which, taken as a whole, discouraged a more differentiated and open engagement with the past: “By examining whether and how these public speakers were able to articulate their experience and interpretation of past events so as to mobilize their audiences toward a major change of consciousness, Speaking the Unspeakable offers a new approach to the problem of the public sphere, a concept as much at stake today as it was during the postwar era” (9). Boos finds the seeds of this change in commemorative culture in performances and rhetorical strategies deployed by writers who, in various ways, questioned the very institutions and forums that sought to enshrine their work.

The meat of the volume consists of close and theoretically informed readings of selected public performances: Martin Buber’s “Genuine Conversion and the Possibility of Peace” (1953), Paul Celan’s “Meridian” (1960), Ingeborg Bachmann’s “German Contingencies” (1964), Hannah Arendt’s “On Humanity in Dark Times” (1958), Uwe Johnson’s Büchner Prize Acceptance Speech (1971), Peter Szondi’s “In Search of Lost Time in Walter Benjamin” (1961), Peter Weiss’s “Laocoon or the Limits of Language” (1965), and Theodor Adorno’s radio addresses “The Meaning of Working Through the Past” (1959) and “Education After Auschwitz” (1965). The thread that connects these public presentations, for Boos, is their authors’ desire to confront audiences with the ethical cost of normalizing rhetoric and lack of engagement with history. Another common aspect of the speakers that Boos describes is their position at the margins of the dominant culture; many had been exiled from Nazi Germany and were thus in the uncomfortable position of at some level lending credibility to an audience that was more than likely filled with perpetrators of one degree or another while allowing that audience to symbolically overcome the burden of this shared past. Returning to the scene of the crimes was a challenge that the speakers met each in their own way. Some set a tone of reconciliation (such as Buber), some chose direct confrontation (such as Celan), while others, most notably Adorno, saw such performances as an opportunity to emancipate and educate the audience through critical thinking. Such moments of resistance to normalizing tendencies are crucial for Boos: “While it is true that the public speakers under discussion take a resistant stance toward—or seek to rise above—rhetorical persuasion, because it is naturally associated with Nazi demagogues who sought the support of the masses by appealing
to popular passions and fears, this does not mean that their speeches are necessarily unpersuasive. As a matter of fact, they sometimes evince a persuasive force in a more immediate and indeed enduring manner than classical deliberative speech” (17).

Boos’s argument is theoretically informed and clearly delineated, with each chapter centered on an individual performance or, in the case of Peter Weiss, an extended discussion of the play *The Investigation* and its documentary source, the Auschwitz trials between 1963 and 1965. Particularly important to Boos’s description of the performers’ ethos is Alexander Kluge’s theorizing of counter-publics, while the work of the Mitscherlichs on the inability to mourn places the audiences’ general lack of understanding and empathy in historical context. Nevertheless, taken together, these interventions planted the seeds of a very productive questioning of normalizing linguistic codes and conspiracies of silence. Boos thus persuasively draws lines of continuity between these early performances of counter-histories to the dominant narratives and the spaces, rituals, and language of commemorative culture in contemporary Germany. One might wish for a more expanded treatment of Adorno’s sustained, public, even missionary attempts to model a reflective and open democracy, as it is difficult to imagine contemporary Germany’s more honest engagement with the Nazi legacy without his weekly radio addresses and broad public presence. Though Boos’s study concludes with a brief chapter on Adorno’s presence as a public intellectual in Germany, the chapter—oddly, for this reader—concludes at the point of his break with student protesters in 1968, arguing that such a parting of ways (over the semantics of Fascism, among other things) was tragically ironic given their fundamental affinities. That small reservation aside, Boos forcefully argues that those who were courageous enough to question dominant narratives in the two decades after the German catastrophe paved the way for a more forthright acknowledgement of responsibility and the ability to remember in detail the process of victimization: “It is important to remember that the broad and sweeping expressions of guilt and responsibility taking place in today’s Germany would not have been possible without the individual subjective interventions by a number of (often Jewish and not always German) intellectuals whom the hegemonic discourse had rendered as outsiders” (209). Boos’s monograph includes an excellent bibliographic apparatus and should enjoy a wide readership in German area studies, rhetorical analysis, and media and communication studies.

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**The Writers’ State: Constructing East German Literature, 1945–1959.**


As the title of the book suggests, East Germany was a country in which literature played a hugely important role, both as a means to help reeducate the people and in the competition to be the ‘true’ Germany. But scholarship has tended to focus on literature published in the final decades of the Cold War, dismissing the early years as unworthy of scholarly attention. Challenging this assumption, Brockmann focuses his most recent book on the long-neglected literature of East Germany from 1945–