

Voices in Counterpoint: An Interview with Michael Götting

by Claudia Drieling

Contrapunctus is the debut novel of Michael Götting, writer, journalist, curator, and artist. Born in Germany, but with North Carolina roots, Götting holds an MA in North American Studies and German Studies from the Free University of Berlin and lives and writes on both sides of the Atlantic. Set in Berlin at the beginning of the twenty-first century, *Contrapunctus* depicts the stories of four Afro-Germans struggling with their bonds in a city stricken by its colonial legacy, nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. Translating the musical concept of contrapuntal composition into narrative form, the novel follows the protagonists' journeys through time and place in Europe, America, and Africa.¹

Michael Götting contributes widely to current debate on how to foster cultural diversity through the media, education, and the arts. And his work with youth on and off stage for Berlin's Ballhaus Naunynstrasse Theatre speaks volumes. The series "We Are Tomorrow – Visions and Retrospection on the Occasion of the 1884 Berlin Conference," enacted 130 years later, and "Decolonize Bodies! Minds! Perceptions!" are just two examples showing Götting's commitment to creating worlds that dismantle inner and outer barriers and are inherently inclusive, as he directs performances with hearing and hearing-impaired youth, blind young adults and those who see, and second- and third-generation youth with or without a so-called immigrant background.²

Contrapunctus is narrated through the voices of Indigo, Rutha-Pong, and Habibi. The fourth character, Olaudah, does not narrate his own story, yet appears as connective tissue among the three, as he has a presence in each of the characters' lives. The first of the voices, Indigo, is that of a troubled young woman who has suffered from fainting spells since early childhood, during which she is thrown into dark worlds in which collective memories of slavery and colonialism come brutally alive. Waking, she finds herself in contemporary Berlin – whether at her uncle's bar, the Dizzy, where she works as a bartender, or at the eightieth birthday party of her grandmother, the oldest living family member of a dynasty of coffee producers – battling to find evidence for her alternate world. Another voice belongs to Rutha-Pong, a model living in the city with her son, Malik, and her boyfriend, Habibi. She is struggling with the question of whom to choose,

¹ Michael Götting, *Contrapunctus* (Unrast, 2015).

² Götting has worked as a freelance artist for the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse Theatre. Find more information about Ballhaus Naunynstrasse Theatre at their website (www.berlin-buehnen.de/en/theatres/ballhaus-naunynstrasse/). For a description of "Decolonize Bodies! Minds! Perceptions!" see its webpage (www.berlin-buehnen.de/en/schedule/decolonize-bodies-minds-perceptions/events/54537).



COURTESY OF BALLHAUS NAUNYNSTRASSE

ABOVE "Decolonize! Bodies! Minds! Perceptions!" event poster, Feb. 2015

OPPOSITE "We Are Tomorrow" series poster, Nov. 2014–Feb. 2015