# Contesting Black Pete: A Conversation with Kristina G. Langarika, Author of *Lola's Sint*

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The Basque Dutch author Kristina G. Langarika, who has been living in the Netherlands since 1995, searched for a "Sinterklaas" story that she could read to her mixed-race daughter Lara Ene. She was astonished to find out that the majority of children's books portrayed the famous black character of "*Zwarte Piet*," Black Pete, as a clownish servant of a white man, showing her daughter little but a damaging representation of her own identity. In response to this glaring lack, Langarika decided to write and illustrate *Lola's Sint*, a bilingual children's book that reimagines the cultural memory of Black Pete. *Lola's Sint* is the first Sinterklaas book in which the Petes are not portrayed as caricaturized versions of a stereotype. They just reflect the skin colour of all the children that come to see the parade. At first Langarika thought she would only print a couple of copies for her daughter and her friends, but soon found out there were more families in the Netherlands who wanted to enjoy reading a book to their children about this happy celebration

without adhering to its harmful narrative. It was then that Langarika decided to expand her small-scale project to a larger one, aiming to reach all the daughters and sons of Dutch and non-Dutch families who had been looking for an alternative story to tell and to read.

*Lola's Sint* invites its audience to address a series of pertinent questions, such as the role of children's literature in the Western imagination of Africa, issues of race in the cultural memory of Black Pete and contemporary multicultural Dutch and Belgian society, as well as recent innovations in the literary field, such as self-publishing and crowdfunding. I have posed Langarika some of these questions during a public conversation organized by LITRA, the Centre for Literature and Trauma, on 27 November 2013 at Ghent University, Belgium.

**SDM:** The public debate on racism and the Black Pete figure is ongoing as we speak. But of course you started to think about the issue much earlier. Could you explain how the idea for this book came about?

**KGL:** In 2011, I was in the local swimming pool in Amsterdam with my daughter, when suddenly Black Pete entered. My daughter Lara Ene immediately said: "Papa!" Black Pete came inside the swimming pool area, he talked in a funny way, looked around with very big eyes. Everyone was laughing. Lara was afraid and started crying. Cycling back home, Lara fell asleep and I started thinking. The entire scene in the swimming pool reminded me of the Master dissertation I wrote at the University of Leiden in 1997. In the thesis, I made a comparative study of representations of black and white characters in children's books in the Netherlands and South Africa and tried to explore what the effect of these representations were on children. Now I thought: how is it possible that I did not look at Black Pete and Sinterklaas literature? In the Afrikaans children's books I studied, black characters were always minor, secondary characters. For example, one would be the gardener's son. On the other hand, despite the Netherlands' self-image as a "tolerant country," it was not very easy to find black protagonists in Dutch children's books, or black Dutch characters interacting with their white Dutch friends in an obvious way. When they were present, they

were, for example, asylum seekers. Maybe my idea of the Netherlands as a happy rainbow country was not that accurate?

After that day at the swimming pool, I decided to go to the children's book shop to look at Sinterklaas literature. I was shocked by the books on display: white characters giving orders to black characters, plenty of stereotypical images. I also saw this huge book *Sinterklaas* by Charlotte Dematons, which had just received a prestigious literary prize, *Het Gouden Penseel*, in 2008. The cover depicts a huge boat with lots of Black Petes working. In 2007 I was travelling in Africa and visited the slave forts in Ghana where the story of the slave boats is told. The cover of this very renowned book by Dematons immediately reminded me of the images of those slave boats I saw in Ghana. For any adult with knowledge of history, Sinterklaas books like these trigger the association with slavery. Besides, ever since I wrote my Master thesis I am very sensitive of how children's literature influences children's self-perceptions.

The Black Pete figure is also in a way made very attractive to children—Black Petes give *pepernoten* [gingersnap cookies], they ride on rollerskates and so on—which makes it easy to swallow the message they convey. I wanted to protect my daughter from the imagery depicted in this tradition, which is unavoidable in Dutch schools each year during the months of November and December. The only tool I had was writing and drawing, so I decided to offer her the same history but with images counteracting those that she would see on the streets.

**SDM:** Let's explore a little more in depth the idea that there is a relationship between the images surrounding us and the impact these have on someone's self-perception and self-esteem.

In her TEDtalk entitled "The Danger of a Single Story," the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about growing up in Nigeria with predominantly British and American children's books. Consequently, when she at a young age started to write her own stories, she mirrored these books: "I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading. All my characters were white and blue-eyed. They played in the snow. They ate apples." Later she discovered writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye:

> I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized. Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

What we gather from this is the enormous significance of children's literature in the sense that they provide us with normative images through which we form our own identities. But how does this work precisely? In the debate about Black Pete, defenders often resort to the argument that children do not see Black Pete as a racial figure; that they see beyond or through his particular skin colour. From this perspective, they ask, what does it matter whether or not he happens to be black? And if the particular racial or ethnic identity of protagonists we encounter in books does matter, to what extent does this influence our capacity to identify with them? How does the process of identification between a reader and a protagonist work precisely? Is it perhaps the accumulation of being exposed to always the very same image that produces a certain effect on our self-perceptions?

Adichie refers to this point in her TED talk as well. She recalls lecturing about her work at a university. A student told her "that it was a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in [Adichie's] novel." Adichie reports herself replying: "I told him that I had just read a novel called *American Psycho* and that it was such a shame that young Americans were serial murderers."

The anecdote touches upon the effect images in books have on how we perceive ourselves and others in real life. It seems to suggest that in contrast to the stereotypical view about purportedly violent Nigerian men, we are exposed to a much more diverse imagination about American men in literature, so that one novel such as *American Psycho* does not engender us to think that all American men are psychopaths.

"Because of America's cultural and economic power," Adichie says, "I had many stories of America." While many people have a single story about Africa.

**KGL:** I did not find many Dutch children's books with black or mixed-race protagonist for my daughter in the Netherlands. There is of course Mylo Freeman, who is starting to change this. On her website, Freeman writes that a few years ago she was told a story about a little Surinamese Dutch girl named Jahkini. Jahkini was offered to play the part of princess in a schoolplay, but she refused. "There's no such thing as a black princess, there's no way I can play that part!," she answered. When Mylo heard that story, she decided to do something and created a picture book about a little strong-willed princess with beautiful brown skin called Arabella. Then she also created princesses from different ethnic backgrounds.

The fact is that princesses are conventionally blonde and have blue eyes. It is a narrow, homogenous representation of a princess. It must have some effect on girls to hear constantly that only blonde, blue-eyed girls are beautiful. Offering choice is important. And this is precisely what is lacking at the moment. The Surinamese Dutch actress Gerda Havertong, who was present at the book presentation of *Lola's Sint*, explained how she herself struggled to find books for her daughter. According to her, we need many more black children's authors. We started counting with our fingers the authors, black or white, portraying black or mixed-race characters. We knew them all personally. We counted approximately five. Some of them are self-publishing authors. Publishers seem to be not all that open to children's books with black protagonists, thinking perhaps that they will only appeal to a "niche audience." I think, however, that books including black or mixed-race protagonists are not only for black children. They are also for white children, so that they can see their black friends, not only at school but also in literature, and can also start believing that their black girlfriends can be princesses.

**SDM:** Gerda Havertong already openly criticized the figure of Black Pete in a popular Sesamestreet episode broadcast on national television in 1987. She says to Pino: "Every year it is the same. As soon as Sinterklaas enters the country, black people, adults as well as children, are being called Black Pete." 1987 is of course a very different time from now.

Recently Anja Meulenbelt called the 2013 debate on Black Pete a turning point moment. Previously the Netherlands always liked to think of itself as an open, inclusive society. Perhaps in the last years, the Netherlands even came to see itself as a nation that had become "too tolerant." According to Meulenbelt, in the Black Pete debate Dutch racism is being openly discussed for the very first time in the Netherlands. The Netherlands did not actually have a civil rights movement, like the US. Perhaps, as Meulenbelt suggests, this could be a catalyzing moment for the long-due emancipation of blacks and other ethnic minorities in the Netherlands? What do you think of her suggestion and do you position yourself in the debate that is going on at the moment at all?

**KGL:** Although I consider Amsterdam my home, I was not born in the Netherlands. One always has to be a little bit cautious when talking about a country which is not yours. Where I come from, frankly, it is even worse than here as far as racism is concerned. At the same time, I do think I have the right to speak out because my child is Dutch, she goes to a school in the Netherlands. In the future, the job opportunities available to her in the Netherlands will to a certain extent depend on the colour of her skin and her surname, as statistics have recently shown.

For the occasion of the 150-year commemoration of the abolition of slavery in the Netherlands, in September 2013, the national TV station NED2 broadcast the television program *De slavernij voorbij* [beyond slavery] exploring the repercussions of the history of slavery for Dutch society today. The way in which non-whites are still being considered as second-class citizens was made very visible and tangible. I recollect one instance in which two Dutch girls, one black and one white, were interviewed together. They seemed to be friends and both agreed that racism was morally questionable for "us." At this stage they were

both using "we" to refer to them both and the Dutch more generally. When asked about a possible solution, the black Dutch girl proposed a modification in the representation of Black Pete in the Sinterklaas tradition. Then suddenly the white Dutch girl replied: "Do not touch our tradition!" Clearly there were two young Dutch people talking about an issue that was important to them. But then suddenly the "we" no longer existed and the white girl talked about an "our" that no longer included the black girl.

Such issues touch upon the future of my child. This is why I want to take a standpoint and have my say about it. Some people corrected me when I said that Lola, the main character in my book, has a black father. They told me I could not say that. They told me: "you should use 'dark' or 'coloured' instead of black." "Explain this to me," I said, "Dutch is my acquired language and I want to know how to use it properly. If you tell me I should say *Lola heeft een donkere vader* instead of *Lola heeft een zwarte vader*, I would like to know the explanation behind it. Am I then also supposed to translate the English phrase 'black is beautiful' into Dutch as *donker is mooi* instead of *zwart is mooi*?" I got different reactions to this question. A black Dutch friend of mine finally told me that this use of language is hypocritical. We are not supposed to be racist. We change our language. And yet, racism keeps on determining people's lives every day.

**SDM:** Some would frame the current debate on Black Pete foremost as a matter of the Netherlands' unwillingness to take anti-racist criticism seriously. They point to the way in which critics of Black Pete are often portrayed as unnecessarily violent spoilers of what is perceived as an innocent children's festivity. To put it bluntly, the mediatisation of the debate is heavily structured along ethnic lines and gives more weight to some voices over others.

For example, we could think of the white journalist Tomas Vanheste's critical opinion piece on Black Pete, "*Zwarte piet is niet futiel*" [Black Pete is not futile], in the Dutch-language online journalism platform *De correspondent*, which was based on his personal experiences of being a father of a coloured child, and which was heavily discussed on social media. Or grandmother Greet Zonnenberg, who sent in a reader's

letter entitled "*Mijn donkere kleinzoons*" [my dark grandsons] to the Volkskrant. Her letter was made available online immediately, was photographed, put on Twitter and received hundreds of retweets.

Compare the reception of their interventions to, for example, Quincy Gario's appearance on the television programme *Pauw en Witteman* and the reactions it triggered. Gerda Havertong also commented that when she tackled the issue in the 1980s, nobody really listened to her. More generally, in debates on racism and multiculturalism, people often want to hear specifically the voices of black people and ethnic minorities, who are considered victims or firsthand experts of racism. Simultaneously, however, their voices are more likely to not be taken seriously. The idea exists that since they allegedly talk mostly from their own personal experiences as victims, their opinions come foremost from the "gut," their response is primarily emotional, irrational and thus their opinions would be more biased. Given this mechanism, do you think that your whiteness allows you to be heard in the debate?

**KGL:** I am white but I am also a foreigner. Yesterday the people from the program *EenVandaag* came to visit me. They made an item on my book. I made my point during the interview and the message was clear. However, at the end of the item, the presenter announces: "Let us now ask the real experts." He went to a school to ask children, who were all white: "Is it okay if we change Black Pete?" They all said: "No way!" They gave the same arguments as their parents probably give. "This is just a festivity," "I do not want to change the festivity," "I do not see the problem," and so on. I wondered why the camera crew did not visit an ethnically mixed school and pose the same question to black Dutch children. It is certainly true that white people's voices seem to be valued more than black people's voices.

But now black Dutch people are starting to say: if we are not given any space to speak, then we create our own space. Let us make our own images, our own platform. It will only grow and become more powerful until we can no longer be ignored. In this sense, the current atmosphere is positive.

The other day, a friend of mine said: "But I have never heard any black people complain about Black Pete." I said: "Perhaps this is

because they are not given any space to voice their complaints." But I do think that in 2013, we have witnessed a major shift. Black activists certainly grabbed the chance to speak up. And an increasingly large group is listening and empathizing. In 2009, Mark Walraven, who had written a drama play on Black Pete and racism at the time, already explained it very clearly in an interview: "This situation is like one in which you are the father of two children and one starts hitting the other. Then everyone thinks it is ordinary that you say to the child: 'Do not do this, you are hurting the other.'"

**AUDIENCE:** The participants in the debate are sometimes portrayed as belonging to one of two opposite poles: those who want to ban Black Pete altogether and those who want to keep it as it is. In *Lola's Sint* you seem to navigate between these two positions. But to what extent can the traditional Black Pete still be salvaged?

The debate in the Netherlands in 2013 seemed to be quite fierce, but in Flanders not so much. There is a very popular television show called *Dag Sinterklaas* [Hello/Goodby Sinterklaas], which has filed off the worst edges of the Black Pete figure, to make him more acceptable one could suppose. The relation between Black Pete and Sinterklaas is more egalitarian, Black Pete is Sinterklaas' partner rather than his servant or slave. It is said that Black Pete is black because he crawls through chimneys. What do you think about the *Zwarte Piet is racisme* [Black Pete is racism] campaign and where do you situate yourself on the continuum between these poles?[1]

**KGL:** I think the *Zwarte Piet is racisme* campaign is great because it exposed many issues that were lying below the surface. But I do not think that people really want to ban Black Pete or the festivity, they want to change him and raise consciousness about his representation. It is just that there are so many people hurt and that is the point.

In the Netherlands, Black Petes have already changed over the years. They are no longer called Black Pete, but Pete, they do not wear earrings,

1. The *Zwarte piet is racisme* campaign is an art project by artist Quincy Gario meant to raise consciousness about the racist dimensions of the folkloric figure Black Pete among the general public. See: http://zwartepietisracisme.tumblr.com/

they are nice. But they are still painted black. To me, every change is welcome, but the most problematic issue is blackface and the basic, repetitive structure of black characters in secondary, serving positions. I really do not see a multicultural future as a true possibility as long as this blackface is socially accepted.

It is great that there are now discussions about whether or not a Rainbow Pete or a Soot Pete is preferable. Frankly, I do not care what Pete looks like as long as he is not painted black. In *Lola's Sint*, the Petes get dirty with soot after going through the chimney, because Dutch people have always told me this is the reason why they are black. But in the book they also wash their skin and wear fresh clothes afterwards. I wanted to show what it looks like when you go through the chimney. The great thing is that children now ask their parents after reading the book: "Why don't the Petes on the streets wash themselves after going through the chimney like the Petes in *Lola's Sint* do?"

**SDM:** We did not talk yet about the aesthetic strategies you used in *Lola's Sint*. You seem to draw extensively from the well-known Sinterklaas story and very subtly turn it around to convey a different message. Rather than a radical rewriting, *Lola's Sint* seems to be a recomposition or reconfiguration of the conventional narrative. Black Petes shift from being secondary figures to actors on the forefront, while Sinterklaas only plays a minor role. The main protagonist named Lola is a mixed-race girl. The children watching the Sinterklaas parade are of a variety of ethnic backgrounds, which is also a feature rarely present in the conventional narrative. In other words, you seem to have made good use of the material that was already there and almost imperceptibly reconfigured the pieces in order to make it more inclusive. You did not, for instance, create a science fiction Sinterklaas narrative in order to imagine a future world of radical equality. Did you decide to stick closely to the recognizable story in order to make sure that everyone could still identify and relate to it?

**KGL:** I wrote a column in 2012 in which I expressed my ideas and impressions of the Sinterklaas parade which I had witnessed for the first time that year. It attracted very aggressive reactions and the conventional arguments. People said: "Do not touch our tradition" or "do you want

to get rid of Black Pete?" It made me very frustrated and I could not understand these angry reactions. I wanted to do something but did not know what exactly. I knew that in any case I would not be able to do it too explicitly. I remember one night, when my daughter was sleeping and I sat next to her, awake, thinking: "What can I do?" Suddenly I had an idea. I wanted to make a book reflecting my dreams of a new reality. I decided I would just draw my story the way I wanted reality to be. Maybe I could not change external reality, but I could change it in my book and in that way offer another reality to my daughter to counteract the reality on the streets. I had also sensed that if I wanted to do something, it had to be at once very subtle and very powerful. This is also why I wanted to do the illustrations myself, even though I had never illustrated before. I knew that illustration would be key.

When the book was just released early September 2013, I did not draw much attention to what was going on in the book. In fact, I would visit bookshops and people would think the illustrations were great, they bought the book without initially noticing that the Petes were not painted black. The book allowed me to usher in my images through the back door. Only a couple of weeks later, when the debate exploded, I dared mentioning it explicitly on the front page of the website: "This is the first children's book in which Black Petes are not painted black, but reflect the skin colour of the children who have come to watch the parade!"

**SDM:** You are from the Basque Country in Spain and live in the Netherlands. I wonder to what extent your cultural attachment to these two places also brings along the possibility to draw on multiple traditions of storytelling, mythologies, cultural resources? Additionally, the Basque Country, it is known, has had its own struggles and conflicts over language, ethnicity and nationalism, often very violent ones. I wonder: how much of your own cultural background has informed the making of *Lola's Sint*? Or were you predominantly motivated by your concern about the future of the Netherlands and your daughter's place in it?

**KGL:** It is certainly true that growing up in the Basque Country makes you aware of the fact that different opinions exist side by side. It

probably provides one with a particular antenna to see such things in other places also. When you live in a conflict area, you develop a sort of sensitivity that you are not forced to develop when you live in a very "quiet" place. I am sure that being raised in South Africa or any other problematic country provides one with similar tentacles. Even if everything looks peaceful and fine on first sight, you can sense things lurking underneath and perhaps sometimes this capability can be an advantage. At the same time, I am very lucky to be in a sense rootless as it provides me an alternative objective lens, enabling me to look at my old as well as my new culture.

**SDM:** We did not talk yet about the fact that *Lola's Sint* is a bilingual book, written in Dutch and English. Could you explain why this is? Would it be far-fetched to see *Lola's Sint* as a contribution to a rather new direction in literature, which would reflect the increasing multilingualism of current Dutch society?

**KGL:** Today one increasingly sees children in the Netherlands like my daughter for instance, whose father is Nigerian, whose mother is Basque. I recently heard that 37% of the children between zero and twelve in Amsterdam are of mixed descent. This would mean that most children grow up with more than one language and culture. I think that being familiar with more than one language, and by extension its culture, is a wealth and not the disadvantage it is usually made out to be in mainstream media, or perceived as at some schools. Besides, to have more than one language and culture, may help one to empathize with others more easily. I think that empathy is the solution to many problems in the world.

**SDM:** Your first novel was published by a well-established publisher, De Geus, while *Lola's Sint* came into being through crowdfunding and self-publishing. I wonder how this came about. Is it possibly related to something you said earlier, about the urgency to take control over one's own representations? Could crowdfunding and self-publishing possibly be political instruments, in the sense that they could help people to take the images of them in their own hands?

**KGL:** I wanted the book to be published before my daughter's next Sinterklaas celebration. I realized that it would take time to convince editors of my project, perhaps they would not have wanted me to take care of the illustrations, since I am not a professional illustrator. The entire production process of a mainstream publisher would take too long. I worried that I would lose control and not be able to make my point on time. This is why I did not approach any publisher for this particular project. The do-it-yourself mentality is certainly spreading. Things are changing. We can create our own stories and images and get them out there, reach the public and make an impact. Besides, mainstream press is predominantly white. To promote my book, I would have to call them. Some of them would never call me back. But then I realized that social media is much more powerful and effective than a call to the newspaper. If you are popular on Facebook and Twitter, the regular press may even call you. The power is shifting to the people, which is great.

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BIOGRAPHY

Kristina G. Langarika (Kristina Goikoetxea Langarika) is a published author from the Basque Country who lives in Amsterdam. Her previous work has been published by *Uitgeverij Contact* (in the anthology *De beste Nederlandse en Vlaamse reisverhalen uit 2004* [The best Dutch and Flemish travel stories from 2004]), *Uitgeverij De Geus* (Langarika's debut novel *Evamar*, 2007) and *Uitgeverij Zirimiri Press* (in the anthology *Emekiro: Verhalen van jonge Baskische schrijfsters* [Stories by young Basque women writers, 2011]). *Lola's Sint* is her first children's book.

BIOGRAPHY

Sarah De Mul is Senior Lecturer of Literary Studies at the Open University in the Netherlands. Her publications and research interests are situated in the field of comparative postcolonial studies with a particular focus on literatures in Dutch and English. Her current projects explore adaptations of postcolonial theory in the Low Countries, ethnic minority writing in Flanders and European (colonial) writing about Africa/the Congo. For her work on multiculturalism in Dutch and Flemish literature, she received the scientific prize 2014 granted by KANTL, the Ghent-based Royal Academy for Dutch Language and Literature.