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‘Her skin absorbs every wavelength of light’: Refracting colour, language and mixed-race identities in Astrid Roemer’s *Off-White*

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As a child growing up in Suriname, a Dutch colony until 1975, Astrid Roemer began creating the books she wanted to read, writing poems and stories “with black people, where I could find myself” (Rowell & Roemer, 1998). Yet, she adds, identifying as black was a problem for many Surinamese: “they were Creoles, but they weren’t black”. Writing about race in Suriname, as for much of the Caribbean, requires close attention to local nuance. In her 1990 novel *Een naam voor de liefde* (‘A Name for Love’), Roemer imagines a woman mixed with “all the fourteen ethnic groups of Suriname” (Rowell & Roemer, 1998). In *Off-White* (2024), the story centres on three generations of Surinamese women, of varyingly English African, Chinese, Dutch, Jewish and French ancestry, a multi-generational mixedness not uncommon in the region.[1] Set in 1966, the novel skilfully slips through time (via flashbacks), space (Suriname and the Netherlands) and voice (there is one ‘I’-narrator and multiple third-person perspectives)[2] to slowly unravel the internal dynamics, secrets and traumas of the Vanta family. This paper explores how Roemer’s disruptive use of imagery, wordplay and colour in *Off-White* reflects foundational ideas of Critical Mixed-Race Studies, including the “mutability of race and the porosity of racial boundaries and categories” as well as the “interlocking nature of racial phenomena with gender, sex, sexuality, class, and other categories of difference” (Daniel, Kina, Dariotis & Fojas, 2014).

Roemer was the first Surinamese author to be awarded the prestigious Prijs der Nederlandse Letteren (Dutch Literature Prize) in 2021, as well as the P.C. Hooft Prize in 2016. Although she published her debut novel in 1974, the first English translation of her work, *On A Woman’s Madness*,[3] remarkably only appeared in 2023. *Off-White* soon followed.[4] Finally, at the age of 78, Roemer is receiving the attention and acclaim she deserves from the Anglophone literary world. In 2023, she was shortlisted for a National Book Award in the United States, and in 2025 was longlisted for the International Booker Prize. “Her questions of race and misogyny and sexuality, and the global and personal effects of colonization, aren’t alien to the current literary

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[1] While there are central male characters, one is dead (the father of the Vanta clan, Anton) and the other is a child (Audi). The women’s voices and stories occupy the majority of the narrative.
[2] The other perspectives are of Anton’s wife, Bee Vanta, their daughter Louise, and her children: Babs, Imker and Audi. The ‘I’ is Heli, the siblings’ sister, who has moved to Utrecht in the Netherlands to study.
[3] Published in 1982 as *Over de gekte van een vrouw*.
[4] The original Dutch text, *Gebroken wit*, was published in 2019.

landscape in the U.S." the editor-in-chief of Two Lines Press, CJ Evans, told *The New York Times*.[5] "But encountering these themes from the incredibly complex and diverse history of Suriname, I think, expands that conversation" (Tepper, 2024).

Broken white

Roemer wrote *Off-White*, she says, as a "linguistic attempt to call into question the supremacy of WHITE (WIT or BLANK in Dutch)" and to challenge the strong negative connotations often given to the word or concept of 'BLACK' (Gu, 2023). In so doing, her aim is to 'clean' the Dutch language of its colonial stereotypes (Brookline Booksmith, 2023). By reading *Off-White* in English, it is likely that we miss some of these linguistic nuances, challenges and experiments. Unless a character draws attention to when code-switching is taking place, the reader cannot tell, for example, when they shift from Surinamese Dutch to Sranan Tongo (Surinamese creole).[6] Yet Roemer's penchant for wordplay—for example, using words with multiple meanings, or the same word in different contexts—forces the reader to view each word afresh. The book's Dutch title, *Gebroken wit*, for example, could be translated more literally as 'broken white', suggesting that the superiority attributed to whiteness has been broken. Alternatively, it could indicate a poor imitation of whiteness, akin to 'broken English' – a disparaging term often used to describe partially English-based languages, such as Guyanese Creole (Creolese) or Pidgin in Nigeria. A similar sense of inferiority is implied by *Less Than White*, an early translation of the book's title (McKay, n.d.).

[5] Two Lines Press is the North America publisher of *Off-White*.

[6] Although according to one of the book's translators, David McKay, the Sranan terms in *Gebroken Wit* generally made it into the translation: "Most were explained in the original: for example, the song title *Ma Fu San Ede Mi Musu Dede*, or the term *bigi-krin*. In those cases, we essentially just translated the Dutch-language gloss or explanation into English. I see that *fayalobi* isn't explained in the original; we added the phrase 'the bright red flower called'. There are probably other examples like that, but not many." The instances of Surinamese Dutch, he adds, were "fairly subtle and infrequent. One example that came up relatively often is *erf*, which is the Surinamese Dutch word for (US) 'yard'/(UK) 'garden' in the sense of the front or back yard/garden of a house (or both together). In the varieties of Dutch native to the Netherlands and Belgium, *erf* isn't normally used that way; instead, it's the word for 'farmyard' or a legal/technical term for something like 'grounds', 'plot of land', 'estate', or 'premises'. In the Netherlands, the front and back yard/garden of a house are called the *voortuin* and the *achtertuin*." (Personal communications, July 2 and 21, 2025).

Racial mixing in the Americas during and after the period of slavery explains why, as Roemer notes, Dutch, English, Spanish and Portuguese "have the largest vocabularies for nuances of skin tone" (Gu, 2023). These vocabularies – words such as 'mulatto' or 'quadroon' – are mostly absent in the novel.[7] The Vanta family are defined, and define themselves, as 'off-white':

> At least once a year, they would map the territory of their past and dig up the roots of the family tree for a brief inspection. And then the adults would conclude once again that, regardless, they were all off-white. And they would drink a toast to that. (Roemer, 2024, p.98).

The word 'regardless' hides histories and ancestries the family would rather forget. Yet their mixed roots cannot be so easily buried. When they move to the capital city of Suriname, they stand out from both the white Hollanders and the local 'Creoles'. In Paramaribo, the "brown men in white shifts and neckties" speak Dutch "as fluently as the soldiers from the Netherlands" (p.180). The Vantas' Dutch, by comparison, is "saturated with the other mother tongues passed down to them by their English and French forebears and sounded like a Hindustani love song" (p.181). Despite the positive, cross-cultural association with a 'Hindustani love song', the father of the family, Anton—who is described as black, while his wife, Bee, is of white, European heritage—makes it his "constant mission to clean up [his family's] speech" (p.181), demonstrating how creole languages—like mixedness—can be devalued as tainted or broken, in comparison to the (false) ideal of a pure race or language.

'Off-white' is repeated so often in the novel—describing everything from the dresses worn by Grandma Bee, to the shells lining her yard—that it becomes somehow both meaningless and full of significance. Bee's granddaughter Imker recalls the time her sister Heli bought a dozen nightgowns with the words 'OFF WHITE' for her siblings and grandmother (p.30).[8] Whether or not the gift was intended as a joke, the nightgowns function like a uniform, giving the family members a shared identity, perhaps a sense of belonging. A nightgown is often used to cover the wearer's naked body, suggesting Heli wants to both comfort and shield her family, who she sees as vulnerable. That Roemer's own middle name is Heli and she, too, left Suriname for the Netherlands, creates a connection between the two women and indicates a shared desire to protect the women of their family or homeland, even those privileged by

[7] The word 'mulatto' is used once by the father of Audi (Bohr), who is "always joking about being addicted to mulatto women" (Roemer, 2024, p.104). Interestingly, the original Dutch text uses the word 'creoolse' (or 'Creole') rather than 'mulatto'. McKay notes in an email that "I think we decided not to translate it literally in this case because "Creole" means very different things in different places, and "mulatto" must have felt to us like the operative nuance or association in this context. In the Surinamese context, the Creoles are one group of descendants of enslaved Africans; their Afro-Surinamese ancestors were mostly redeemed (bought into freedom) or emancipated by the abolition of slavery. Most of them moved to towns and cities once free and often intermarried with other ethnic groups. Most Creoles are mixed-race to some degree and often partly of white ancestry" (Personal communication, July 2, 2025).

[8] Ironically Off-White™ is an actual fashion brand, founded in 2013 by the (now late) designer and artist Virgil Abloh. Given that *Gebroken Wit* was published in 2019, it is possible that Roemer is aware of the label and is gently poking fun at the idea that in today's capitalist society, more than 50 years on from when *Off-White* is set, people of all races would pay a premium to wear clothing emblazoned with 'Off-White'.

their 'off-white' skin colour.[9] That Bee's nightgown becomes spotted with the blood she coughs up at night feels more than a coincidence. Though the blood is a symptom of Bee's unnamed illness, Imker wonders "[s]urely it couldn't be heartbreak revealing itself as blood instead of tears" (p.12), tying the heartbreak to the migration of Winston, her mother's brother, to the Netherlands some years before – the same uncle who, unbeknownst to Imker, is her father. After washing the clothing, Imker says excitedly "Look, Grandma, all clean!" (p.30). However, removing the stains of incest, sexual violence, slavery and racism from the family's history (and society at large) is not so easy.

"Off-white is the color of bittersweet almonds once you've peeled away the dark brown skin," Bee tells Imker (p.30). Though she says the words 'warmly', there is a sense that Bee has spent many years trying to unpeel the dark brown skin that her black husband, Anton, added to her white, European lineage. Along with the rest of her family, she blames her father, Julienne, for having "married her off, his own daughter, to the lowest of the low – a descendant of slaves" (p.110). Even years later, the sentiment remains and when Bee meets her son's future wife, she thinks "*[s]he's even blacker than your father!"* and feels that he has "fallen into the wrong hands" (p.29).[10] When Bee rejects her brother-in-law's offer to wash away the "bad blood" of her English forefathers with a traditional Winti ceremony, she refuses not because she believes it is impossible but because she wants to forget: "Her husband's half-brother was trying to remind her of things no one would say to her face, things that certainly had happened – slave whippings, disfigurements, rape, murder" (p.225). Unable, or unwilling, to connect the past to the present, she blindly insists, "My children and I have nothing to do with slavery, and neither do you, Anton!" (p.226). In response, Anton points to the family's relative poverty and says: "Bee, my dear wife, that has everything to do with slavery." While Roemer is keen to clean the Dutch language of its racial prejudices, she is determined that Suriname's colonial past is not forgotten.

Refracting mixedness

To write *Gebroken Wit* (2019) and her later novel *DealersDochter* (2023), Roemer relocated temporarily to Scotland and the Isle of Skye, from where some of her ancestors had set off for Suriname. She reflects that increasingly "I see myself in other people, even when I'd rather not" (Gu, 2023). *Off-White* can be read as Roemer grappling with the white, European threads of her ancestry, as well as with the racial plurality and divisions of Suriname. She claims that after reading *Gebroken wit*, hundreds of people "correct their behaviour and adjust their relationships" (Leuwsha, 2021). What these corrections involve, she does not elaborate. However, perhaps it is something akin to her own personal journey, which has seen her arrive at a comprehensive "understanding of my ethnicity, my female gender, my heterosexuality, my historicity as a Surinamese woman, and my membership in the human species. […] above all, I've learned how to let go of those categories and become more open to our remarkable existence on this strange planet" (Gu, 2023).

[9] On the dedication page of *Off-White*, Roemer notes: "I have used autobiographical structures to write a novel—in other words, a fictional story—and I ask my readers to respect the real-world privacy of potentially identifiable people."
[10] Italics in original text.

There is another possible meaning to *gebroken wit*. "Essentially, it refers to refracted sunlight," says Roemer, "a rainbow, for instance – showing a wide range of colors" (Gu, 2023). While the racial (and sexual) inclusivity represented by a rainbow may seem a long way from the heteronormative, highly racialised society the Vanta family live within, it is a useful image to explore, articulate and reimagine racial mixedness and other boundary crossings. In colonial taxonomies of race, white was presented as superior and pure. Yet passing white light through a prism reveals a multitude of shades. Thus, while Bee's granddaughter Babs may be "almost as white as her father [Boyce]" (Roemer, 2024, p.129), his whiteness can be refracted to reveal other ancestries, as Babs defensively admits: "So Boyce is partly Chinese-Surinamese, so what? There's also some Jewish and white blood mixed in, and a little African ancestry" (p.352). The science of colour is also drawn on by Anton to challenge the negativity often assigned to blackness. When his daughter Ethel is born with dark skin and blonde hair, a stark contrast to the couple's other, light-skinned children, Anton sees her as his 'masterpiece' and tells his wife's family: "All of you are off-white, but her skin absorbs every wavelength of light; yes, our Esther is whole" (p.100). In this powerful reversal of language and ideas, light and all its positive associations are reimagined as black. By recasting Esther's dark skin as a marker of being 'whole', Anton reveals whiteness as broken.

When Esther is seven, Anton takes her to visit his relatives on the plantation where he grew up, and returns without her. "He gave away his own child so she could have a better life than he could offer her in our family" Bee tells Imker (p.110). The absence of Esther becomes a black hole, a tear in the fabric of the family and a trauma passed down the generations. Her invisible presence in the novel is evidence of the unpredictability and arbitrariness of race, that sees siblings with the same mother and father born with different skin colours, facial features and hair textures. While Winston and Louise are judged to be "a just barely respectable shade of light brown", Esther is deemed "a step too far toward an undesirable extreme" (p.99). Her arrival is described as upsetting the family balance, which is only restored by the arrival of Laura who was born "with the right complexion". A member of Bee's family suggests that "brown was a case of a 'dirty womb'" as if she couldn't see the father, Anton, there in his radiant blackness' (p.148). In a society where status and opportunities are directly proportional to the lightness of one's skin, colour matters. "*That's Paramaribo for you*," reflects Louise, "*winning or losing is all a question of skin color*"" (p.183).[11] However Roemer repeatedly challenges such attitudes, for example referring to Anton's 'radiant blackness' (another positive association of black with light) and by situating the characters' prejudices and racist language within Suriname's complex colonial history.

'A society born of other people's violence'

While "post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the (New World) *black* subject", notes Christina Sharpe, new forms of subjectivity were also created "for Africans, Europeans and others" (2010, p.3) – including mixed individuals and families like the Vantas. The family are a product not only of slavery (both slave owner and enslaved), but also the violently patriarchal society it left behind. That Louise has four children by four different men, each a different shade of 'off-white', is less a comment

[11] Italics in original text.

on race as on the disturbing lack of control that the women in the novel often have over their own bodies. Even Louise's youngest child, Audi, senses something is wrong with the treatment of women in Suriname's capital and feels "so sorry for the girls and woman of Paramaribo" (Roemer, 2024, p.332). His sisters, however, seem to view their situation as an improvement on what came before – and perhaps in 1960s Suriname it is. Yet, commenting on her grandmother's life, Imker could be talking about herself when she notes: "It must have been so hard for a young woman to find an escape route in a society born of other people's violence" (p.111). Though he shows concern for the girls and women around him, Audi also recognises the benefits of claiming the man who raped his mother ('Bohr Libretti, the Adonis who'd fiendishly fertilized his mother', p.330) as a father: "In the Scouts group, he told everyone his father was a gynecologist who worked hard and earned good money, and his status there significantly improved. Mama was right: money may be dirty, but it sure cleans up your life" (p.332-333).

In 'Decolonizing Feminism: The Home-Grown Roots of Caribbean Women's Movements', Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert notes that the image of the "closely chaperoned, virginial, white or light-skinned senorita [...] is as race-, class-, and stereotype-bound as that of the happy-go-lucky unmarried black mother of the Jamaican or Trinidadian yard with her large brood" (1997). While Louise buys into this 'virginal' stereotype, seeing her daughter Heli as "a blank page, chalk-white paper, sky-blue purity" (Roemer, 2024, p.77), Roemer complicates this image by presenting moments where the (younger) Vanta women are independent agents, with their own sexual desires and hopes. At the same time, however, they are also subject to the rampant sexual abuse of men, from which their skin colour and class cannot entirely protect them. Fifteen-year-old Babs is well aware that while her 'off-white' complexion is currency, so too is her virginity. Her boyfriend, Aram, assures her he will not take advantage: "There are girls all around me, Babs, and women I can fuck whenever and however I want" (pp.128-129). Babs is understandably disturbed by his assurance, but she is also "relieved; her virginity was for a wedding night somewhere in a faraway land" (p.129). Aram's apparently free access to other women's bodies is shocking, yet apparently normal in the world of *Off-White* where sexual violence by men against women can take place anywhere: at the sea wall (p.262), on the gynaecologist's table (p.233, p.320), at a sweetshop (p.268), even at home by a member of one's own family (p.142). Anton, Gordon (Heli's father) and Lester (Louise's current boyfriend) are all military men, and the embers of the Second World War scorch the fringes of this novel, yet the real battle is the quotidian warfare faced by the women, who live in what Sue Ann Barratt terms 'states of unpeace' (Barratt, 2024). When Louise is raped by Bohr, her unwanted pregnancy is fittingly described as "like a hand grenade, sending her joie de vivre up in smoke" (Roemer, 2024, p.105).

Yra van Dijk and Ghanima Kowsoleea note that while the men are "once again the aggressors" in *Off-White*, they are also presented as victims of the history of slavery, too, "in which the Creole population was denied a family" (2021, p.47). Rather than demeaning the 'diverse family shapes' that have emerged from slavery and colonialism, Roemer reframes them as "valuable" and fitting "precisely into our multi-ethnic society" (Leuwsha, 2021). That another of Roemer's aims through her work is to "define family life as a broken unity" (Roemer, 1996, p.37) likely relates to the fact that she has also worked as a family therapist. In her therapeutic practice, she explains, "I also test the (blood) relationship networks on their loyalty questions

relating specifically to the constancies of cultural identity (race, gender, nationality, religion, etc.)" (p.39). In *Off-White* we can recognise this same intersectional approach, as well as the 'therapeutic-analytical' method of psychiatrist J. Nagy, who, Roemer notes, "investigates family relations and structures at least over three generations, searching for all kinds of loyalties which can conflict within an individual" (p.39). In *Off-White*, Roemer's does not seek to prove her characters to be inherently loyal or disloyal, good or bad, but to present the many different conflicting identities contained within one person, one family, or even one country. In her centring of plurality over singularity, the fluidity and multiplicity of mixedness is also affirmed.

'I'm mixed race, too'

Bee's son Winston complains that, in Paramaribo, he has 'too much "slaveholder blood" to be offered any opportunities by the descendants of freed slaves' (Roemer, 2024, p.198). The Vanta family, he says, do not fit in anywhere: "[w]e're not black, and we're not white" (p.205). His father, Anton, angrily rebukes him, insisting: "you're both, whether you like it or not, and treat these values as your start-up capital, because I don't have anything more to offer you" (p.206). His admonishment reframes Winston's mixed heritage as cultural capital. Earlier in the novel, mixedness is again associated with positive values by the midwife who delivers Ethel, who describes her as "jewel, mixed from a formidable network of bloodlines" (p.99). There is a growing sense that the younger generation of the Vanta family are learning to accept and assert their multiple heritages, including their black ancestry. "I'm English," says Imker 'boldly, adding, "French and African, too"' (p.161). Her friend Umar responds, "I'm mixed race, too: Asian with a touch of African" (p.161). With the word 'too', he positions Imker as 'mixed-race', establishing a connection between them and offering mixedness as an identity to embrace – an alternative to the 'OFF-WHITE' nightgowns.[12] Although Imker's gaze when they visit the waterfront marketplace is still that of an observer – "the swarming and cackling of poultry and customers amused her" (p.334) – in the market, with its diverse foods and people, Imker finds a buoyant site of mixedness and a sense of belonging: "[n]o other place perked up her mood as quickly" (p.161).

If the marketplace is a site of mixedness, then food is its language. Louise and her brother Winston are brown "like milky coffee" (p.148). The skin of Bee's brothers is the "color of pancake batter" (p.69), while Anton is "as dark as a raisin" (p.69). When Babs meets her father, Boyce, he encourages her to embrace her Chinese heritage: "Eat, eat your fill, Babs" (p.49) referring to the clubhouse they visit as a place "where us folks with Hong Kong roots can do what we enjoy doing: cooking, eating, playing [mah-jongg]" (p.50). Boyce's new family live together in one 'big house' (p.50), which is strange but appealing to Babs, who wants to "belong to that exotic family" – subverting the notion of what is considered ordinary. In an attempt to belong, "she stuff[s] herself with food like a spoiled brat", but the dishes leave her feeling "slow and sleepy" (p.51) rather than part of the club, or her father's family.

[12] Later, when Umar's parents visit the Vanta family home, he tells Imker, "Javanese people from the sticks don't find it easy to visit sophisticated Creoles in the capital, you know" (p.304). Here, Roemer is reminding the reader that race is intertwined with the space and social status a person occupies.

Food is even imbued with the power to change someone's race. When she gives birth to a dark-skinned daughter, Ethel, Bee "blame[s] herself for possibly having eaten too much of something or the other [when she was pregnant] – sugarcane stalks, she'd been crazy about those, especially the dark purple ones, which she loved to chew on" (p.99). However, Bee is also pictured cuddling Ethel, "nursing her tenderly at her ginger-colored breasts" (p.100), a reminder of something else that is 'off-white': breastmilk. Even when her children and grandchildren are grown, Bee continues to show love through food: sharing with Imker her recipe for *fiadu* ("Brown as your mother on the outside, and the inside off-white, like you and me" p.232); making "chicken pot pie" for Laura, who is detained in a mental-health facility (p.350); and packing a bottle of homemade *orgeat* (almond syrup), made from the almond trees in her own yard, for Heli to take to the Netherlands. In the cold Utrecht air, the contents of the bottle separate "into light and dark portions" (p.366), suggesting the divisive racial categorisations of Dutch colonialism. However, on the very last page of the book, Heli notices that the bottle has cracked:

> Grandma's syrup is oozing along the cupboards and counter toward the tiled floor, slow as heavy honey. A pool of off-white beginning to harden. I crouch down. Drop my index finger. Lick and dip, lick and dip. Just as sweet as my grandmother's always been to me [...] The bottle is empty now. All around me, the fragrance of almonds. (p.366)

The oozing of the syrup mirrors the secrets of the family finally spilling out. Heli has just received a letter informing her that Esther, her aunt, is now living in Ghana with her husband and children. Rather than a call for racial endogamy, this fruitful return to Africa is a triumph for Esther – and for Roemer, too, who once said that through literature, "I'm trying little by little to reach the continent of my ancestors" (Busby, 1994, p.724). The fact that Esther and her husband are both medical practitioners ("He's an internist. She's a pharmacist", p.366) suggests a process of healing. The breaking of the bottle brings the separated syrup back together and releases a sweet fragrance into the air. In a society where "the dividing lines between ethnic groups were sharp and often unyielding" (p. 277), it is a hopeful image to end on – akin to a rainbow after a storm.

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