




The Saliency of Blackness in Obama's *A Promised Land*: A Cognitive-Grammar Perspective

Dr. Amal A. E. Gami

English Language Department
Faculty of Arts, Suez University
Amal.Gami@arts.suezuni.edu.eg

 10.21608/jfpsu.2025.393480.1451

Received: 11/6/2025 **Accepted:** 6/7/2025

Published: 17/7/2025

This is an open access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



The Salience of Blackness in Obama's *A Promised Land*: A Cognitive-Grammar Perspective

Abstract

This study uses a Cognitive Grammar framework to analyze Barack Obama's strategic linguistic and cognitive construal operations in *A Promised Land*, focusing particularly on how he configures Black identity salience in the American political landscape. Addressing two key research questions—how Blackness becomes salient both linguistically and cognitively and which characteristics are foregrounded, and what this reveals about Obama's role in redefining Blackness—the analysis aims at profiling and trajector/landmark alignment as prominence types. The findings indicate that Obama uses language to achieve significant ends: foregrounding structural racial disparities (e.g., exclusion), challenging prevalent racial stereotypes (e.g., media portrayals), and managing external framing and political othering. Interestingly, the analysis reveals how Obama deliberately opens up the definition of Blackness from monolithic limitations. Using his own life as an exemplar, he deconstructs and expands meaning, including his moral character (*'only trying to be a good man was enough'*) while advancing a broader, more universal definition of Blackness—one not exclusively determined by others' perceptions, outside stories, or stereotypes, but by personal character and common values. Moreover, Obama's narrative links personal experience and collective U.S. racial history. His observation that *'Nothing in Black people's experience'* tells them that one Black American may win the presidency of the U.S. reflects the rigid cognitive barriers imposed by centuries of systemic oppression and exclusion. Yet, his own achievement, framed as *"a miracle,"* serves to foreground a rupture in this historical pattern. Overall, this study recognizes language as a cognitive tool in the construction of racial perception and political accountability, as well as the creation of an identity connecting individual history with societal consciousness, contributing significantly to discourse on Blackness in America.

Keywords: Cognitive grammar; Construal phenomena; Blackness; Prominence; Memoir.

بروز هوية السود في مذكرات أوباما "أرض الميعاد": منظور النحو المعرفي

مستخلص

تستخدم هذه الدراسة إطار النحو المعرفي (Cognitive Grammar) لتحليل عمليات البناء اللغوي والمعرفي الاستراتيجية لباراك أوباما في مذكرات "أرض الميعاد" (*A Promised Land*)، مع فحص كيفية تشكيله لبروز هوية السود ضمن المشهد السياسي الأمريكي. تتناول الدراسة سؤالين بحثيين أساسيين—كيف يتم إبراز هوية السود لغوياً ومعرفياً وما هي جوانب الهوية العرقية التي يتم تسليط الضوء عليها، وماذا يكشف هذا البروز عن دور أوباما في إعادة تعريف هوية السود—ويركز التحليل على آليات البروز، وتحديدًا التتميط (profiling) ومحاذاة المسار/المعلم (trajector/landmark alignment). تكشف النتائج أن أوباما يوظف اللغة لتحقيق عدة أهداف مترابطة: فهو يبرز الفوارق المنهجية (مثل الإقصاء من الأدوار القيادية)، ويتحدى الصور النمطية المنتشرة (مثل تلك الموجودة في التصوير الإعلامي واللقاءات الشخصية)، ويتعامل مع المحاولات المتعمدة للتأطير الخارجي والتهميش السياسي المصممة لتقويض مصداقيته. والأهم من ذلك، يوضح التحليل كيف يوسع أوباما بنشاط تعريف هوية السود إلى ما يتجاوز الحدود الأحادية. ويربط سرده التجربة الفردية بالتاريخ العرقي الجماعي، ويتجلى ذلك بشكل خاص في صياغته لـ "الحاجز المعرفي العميق للاستحالة" فيما يتعلق برئاسة سوداء، على النقيض من إنجازاته الذي وصف بـ "المعجزة". في نهاية المطاف، تسهل استراتيجيات أوباما اللغوية إعادة تعريف هوية السود التي تتمحور حول الشخصية الأخلاقية ("مجرد محاولة أن تكون رجلاً صالحاً كانت كافية")، مؤكدة على الفاعلية ضد التصنيفات المقيدة. ومن خلال النتائج، تؤكد هذه الدراسة على الدور القوي للغة كأداة معرفية في تشكيل التصورات العرقية، وتسهيل التعامل مع المسؤولية السياسية، وبناء هوية تربط بين السيرة الذاتية والوعي الجمعي، مما يسهم بشكل كبير في الخطاب حول هوية السود في أمريكا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النحو المعرفي، ظواهر البناء، هوية السود، البروز، مذكرات.

The Salience of Blackness in Obama's *A Promised Land*: A Cognitive-Grammar Perspective

Introduction

Barack Obama's *A Promised Land* (2020) is more than a presidential memoir—it is a rich narrative space where race, identity, and political legacy are intricately interwoven. As the first African American president of the United States, Obama's recounting of his journey to and through the White House serves as a compelling site of racial meaning-making, offering nuanced reflections on Blackness in America. In telling his story, Obama must navigate a dual imperative: to critique systemic injustice while maintaining a unifying political posture in an ideologically polarized nation. The memoir, therefore, provides a fertile ground for examining how racial identity is linguistically constructed, negotiated, and made salient through discourse. While Obama's racial identity has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, particularly in sociopolitical and rhetorical studies, there remains a notable gap in the literature: a lack of cognitive-grammar-based analysis of how racial salience—especially Blackness—is linguistically modulated in presidential autobiographies. This study addresses that gap by applying a Cognitive Grammar (CG) framework to explore how linguistic structures in *A Promised Land* cognitively foreground Black identity and racial experience.

According to Langacker (2008), Cognitive Grammar is not merely a theory of linguistic structure but a model of conceptualization that reflects the broader cognitive processes through which humans engage and interpret the world. Central to CG is the concept of construal: the idea that meaning arises not only from the conceptual content evoked by a linguistic expression but also from how that content is *construed*—that is, selectively presented, profiled, and foregrounded. Studying construal phenomena thus reveals how language encodes patterns of thought and frames of perception, offering insight into what speakers attend to and how they cognitively organize experience.

This study examines construal operations in Obama's memoir, particularly those related to profiling and trajectory/landmark alignment—the two mechanisms of prominence or salience within CG. By focusing on passages where racial identity, Blackness, and systemic inequality are discussed, the study investigates how Obama linguistically orchestrates attention around themes of race and identity to construct a coherent narrative of self and nation.

Race and identity is a recurring theme in *A Promised Land*, which spans “Obama's early life, his political rise, and the initial years of his presidency, culminating in the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011” (Brøndal, 2024, p. 517). While the memoir touches on multiple dimensions of identity—including religion, family, and national belonging—references to his name (“Hussein”), religious background (Christian/Muslim), and attitudes towards his presidency reveal a recurring concern with racial perception and positioning. These narrative elements serve as flashpoints for the construal of Blackness, both as a personal experience and a sociopolitical symbol.

Objectives and Research Questions

The primary aim of this study is to explore how Obama uses linguistic and cognitive strategies to construe Black identity in *A Promised Land*. In particular, the study investigates how the cognitive salience of Blackness is shaped through language, and how Obama selectively foregrounds racial memories and experiences to navigate tensions between individual identity, collective history, and political responsibility.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is Blackness made prominent in *A Promised Land*, and which aspects of racial identity does Obama foreground most prominently?

2. What does the salience of Blackness in *A Promised Land* reveal about Obama's role in (re)defining Blackness within the context of the American political landscape?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to reveal how language serves as a cognitive tool in shaping racial perception and personal identity—particularly in contexts where political discourse demands strategic self-representation and interpretive flexibility.

Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with construal operations—cognitive processes that influence how meaning is shaped—extends across various fields, including graphic memoirs (Pleyer & Schneider, 2014), literary analysis (Browse, 2018; Rundquist, 2020), and critical media discourse studies (Hart, 2013; Ullmann, 2015). At the same time, extensive scholarship investigates Barack Obama's deliberate articulation of racial identity through autobiographical writing (Brøndal, 2024), political discourse (Pitcher, 2010; Sikanku, 2023), and frameworks of Black male vulnerability (Smith, 2025). However, a notable gap remains: no research has utilized the construal model from cognitive grammar to examine how Obama linguistically frames the prominence of Blackness in his post-presidential memoir, *A Promised Land*.

Construal: A Multi-Dimensional Tool for Meaning Construction

The construal phenomenon is studied in different areas of linguistic research including stylistics, critical discourse analysis and journalism. It is also studied in relation to visual domains and multimodal autobiographies. Pleyer and Schneider (2014) study construal in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a graphic memoir which detail not only Bechdel's life, but also the life of her father. Pleyer and Schneider (2014) assume that the concepts of cognitive grammar provide a fruitful approach to graphic novels as it considers visual processes of meaning construal as being founded on the same conceptual principles as linguistic constructions of meaning. They study profiling as one of the most fundamental construal operations.

Pleyer and Schneider (2014) conclude that Bechdel presents different conceptualizations of her father in terms of profiling in order to highlight aspects of his personality as well as the nature of their relationship.

Other stylistics studies deal with construal and other cognitive grammar concepts and their role in meaning construction. Browse (2018) supports the view that a cognitive grammar analysis to novels adds to a functionalist account of literary effects like Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). To do so, Browse (2018) studies the conceptual processes involved in the reader's interpretation of the character's deviant mindstyle in Golding's novel, *Inheritors*, and compares the results to Halliday's analysis of the same novel in his 1971 seminal work 'Linguistic function and literary style: An enquiry into the language of William Golding's *Inheritors*.' Browse (2018) concludes that, unlike SFG that provides a structural and social perspective on the language used by Golding, cognitive grammar delves into the cognitive and conceptual underpinnings of the novel's linguistic styles through considering readers as active participants who bring their conceptual "baggage" in meaning construction. Moreover, Rundquist (2020) applies cognitive grammar concepts such as construal, specificity, scope, profile and domain in analyzing the protagonist character of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. The study concludes that construal helps illuminate how Lowry's linguistic choices reflect the psychological and emotional states of the characters, especially the Consul.

Construal phenomenon is also studied within critical discourse analysis in press headlines and press coverage of political events. For example, Hart (2013) studies the conceptualizations of violence invoked by online reports of political protests published in *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*. The study concludes that some significant differences in grammar and construal seem to support their more liberal versus conservative stance, respectively. It also concludes that such differences suggest that language choices in media reports can influence readers' perceptions of events reinforcing specific ideologies. Likewise, Hart (2021) examines

mystification in media responses to incidents on the Gaza-Israel border where some Palestinians were killed. Hart (2021) observes that construal is evoked by some linguistic features, such as intransitive verbs, agentless passive constructions, and nominalizations, which contribute to mystification. Moreover, Ullmann (2015) examines construal operations in international press language in covering the Arab revolutions focusing on the 2011 Egyptian protests. The study concludes that some grammatical constructions generate event-construal. For example, Ullmann (2015) argues that the use of present participle or progressive forms directs focus to certain aspects of the events; hence, influencing readers' perceptions. Additionally, Xing and Zhang (2018) study prominence as one dimension of construal of English news headlines of five e-papers reporting the same news events. They conclude that different headlines in different e-papers give prominence to different parts of news events which reflects their different attitudes towards the events.

Barack Obama: Race, Identity, and Blackness

A growing body of research explores how Barack Obama navigates and constructs racial identity across various rhetorical and autobiographical contexts. Scholars have analyzed Obama's use of race and identity in his autobiographical writings, speeches, and political performances, revealing the nuanced and often strategic ways he engages with Blackness, African heritage, and racial politics in the United States and beyond.

Brøndal (2024) investigates how Barack Obama employs the concept of race in his three autobiographical books: *Dreams from My Father* (1995), *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), and *A Promised Land* (2020). Brøndal (2024) argues that Obama employs race differently in each of the three autobiographies depending on the political context and the genre conventions of each book. On the one hand, in *Dreams from My Father*, Obama tends to portray himself as a "blacker" version of himself in his journey toward understanding his racial identity. On the other hand, in his second book *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama positions race as subservient to national

unity. According to Brøndal (2024), *The Audacity of Hope* is a campaign autobiography that downplays racial grievance in favor of unity and moderation, aligning with Obama's presidential ambitions. Moreover, in *A Promised Land*, in which Obama reflects on his post-presidency life story, Brøndal (2024) argues that Obama acknowledges the limits of reform in racially and ethnically diverse societies like the U.S. In other words, Obama expresses that racism is deeply woven into American institutions and cannot be easily fixed by individual policy decisions.

Pitcher (2010) argues that Obama's presidency has redefined the role of blackness in U.S. racial politics, transitioning from the civil rights era's oppositional activism to a strategic, performative "post-black" identity that centralizes blackness within mainstream power structures. According to Pitcher (2010), Obama's presidency paves the way to a new antiracism where blackness moves from the margins to the mainstream. In other words, Obama's new sense of blackness shifts U.S. racial politics from being marginalized citizens having no power as opposed to white-dominant ones to being central to mainstream political power, redefining Blackness as part of the American political landscape. Thus, Obama's blackness is not understood as a fixed or essential identity, but rather as a flexible, strategic, and conscious performance shaped to fit different audiences and political goals.

Additionally, Sikanku (2023) investigates how Barack Obama frames his African identity in key speeches using Afrocentric frames as a communication-based tool to analyze how he centers his African heritage and culture as key identity components. Sikanku (2023) concludes that Obama uses four main Afrocentric frames in his speeches that construct his identity. The first frame is 'exceptionalism and African origins,' in which, argues Sikanku (2023), he uses in his speeches his African heritage to emphasize how a person with his background could rise to prominence in the U.S., portraying America as a land of opportunity. The second frame is "heritage and memories of a father" in which Obama, according to Sikanku (2023), frequently mentions his Kenyan father and

grandfather so that he can assert his African origin and link African colonial history to African American struggles. The third frame is 'communalism' in which Obama stresses the values of unity and collectivity that mark Afrocentric thought. The last frame identified in Obama's speeches is 'Africa and democracy' frame. Sikanku (2023) argues that Obama frames his African heritage through being credible and critical about Africa while maintaining diplomatic respect because of his ethnic lineage. One example is that, in his speech in 2009 to the Ghanaian Parliament he bluntly says that "Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions."

Others study Obama's speeches through the lens of Black male vulnerability framework. Smith (2025) analyzes Obama's 2013 Morehouse, a historically Black liberal arts college for men College speech. He makes some critiques, revealing Obama's contradictory attitudes towards Black males. For instance, Smith (2025) criticizes Obama in his "no excuses" speech for shifting focus to individual responsibility rather than the "structural and ideological mechanisms within the public sphere constraining Black men's social mobility and life chances regardless of their academic achievements" (p. 221). Also, Smith (2025) criticizes Obama for neglecting in his speech the material realities of Black men which reveal how Black men's physical bodies and environments are harmed by systemic forces (e.g., police violence, poverty, incarceration).

All in all, although existing studies thoroughly explores construal's function in various contexts and Obama's performances of racial identity, these lines of inquiry remain largely unintegrated. Cognitive grammar approaches have yet to be applied to presidential autobiographies, and analyses of *A Promised Land* have not investigated its linguistic encoding of Blackness through cognitive processes such as foregrounding, profiling, or trajectory/landmark alignment. This oversight is notable given construal theory's potential to uncover how language choices highlight underlying ideological perspectives—especially pertinent in political memoirs. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how construal mechanisms linguistically shape the perceived relevance of

Blackness in Obama's reflections on authority, legacy, and persistent racial disparities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded on the notion of construal phenomena within Cognitive Grammar (CG) (Langacker, 2013). Specifically, it focuses on profiling and trajector/landmark alignment as two key mechanisms for establishing prominence or salience.

Cognitive Grammar (CG)

CG provides a comprehensive view of language structure, emphasizing its relation to meaning construction, human cognitive operations, and conceptualization. CG treats grammar as inherently symbolic, constituting the "structuring and symbolization of semantic content" (Langacker, 1987, p.12). Lexicon, morphology, and syntax form a continuum, with mental grammar represented as an inventory of symbolic assemblies – fundamental units pairing a semantic pole (meaning) and a phonological pole (form) (Evans, 2007; Langacker, 1987, 1991, 2008, 2017).

Meaning in CG comprises both conceptual content and a specific way of construing that content. Construal is defined as "our manifest ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways" (Langacker, 2013, p. 43). Linguistic expressions evoke a set of cognitive domains (their matrix) as the basis for meaning. Langacker (2013) distinguishes between basic domains (cognitively irreducible, e.g., space, time, color space) and nonbasic domains (concepts ranging from minimal, e.g., RED, to complex systems of knowledge).

CG posits language as integral to human cognition, viewing grammatical meanings as insights into "our mental world and its construction" (Langacker, 2008, p.4). Conceptualization is dynamic, grounded in physical and social reality. Linguistic meaning depends on: 1) a presupposed conceptual substrate (background knowledge,

context), 2) the construal imposed, and 3) pervasive imaginative abilities like metaphor (Langacker, 2008). Construal is thus the cognitive operation selecting structural possibilities to decide language use (Bien, 2021).

Langacker (2008, 2013) identifies four broad classes of construal phenomena. This study concentrates on the salience dimension, concerned with which elements receive the most unconscious attention. Salience (or prominence) is a conceptual phenomenon inherent in our apprehension, shaped by linguistic description, not an inherent property of the world (Langacker, 2013). It manifests through profiling and trajector/landmark alignment:

Profiling

A linguistic expression accesses conceptual content at different levels: the maximal scope (entire conceptual base), the immediate scope (the foregrounded, "onstage" portion within active domains), and the profile (the specific substructure within the immediate scope that is the expression's focus of attention and referent). Profiling utilizes the principle of figure/ground segregation, conceptually foregrounding the profile against its base (Pleyer & Schneider, 2014).

Trajector/Landmark Alignment

This construct distinguishes meanings of relational expressions by conferring differing degrees of prominence on participants within a profiled relationship. The trajector (tr) is the most prominent participant, the primary focus construed as being located, evaluated, or described. The landmark (lm) is a secondary focus within the same relationship. This alignment creates semantic contrasts (e.g., *above* vs. *below*, *before* vs. *after*, *have a parent* vs. *have a child*) even when conceptual content is shared, by assigning different entities as trajector and landmark. It applies to any cognitive domain, and participants can be things or relationships.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative cognitive-grammar (CG) analysis to investigate how linguistic construal operations construct the salience of Blackness in Barack Obama's memoir *A Promised Land* (2020). The methodology is anchored in Langacker's (1987, 2008) theory of prominence—specifically profiling and trajector/landmark alignment—as mechanisms for encoding salience. These operations are examined as strategic tools for racial identity negotiation, addressing a gap in existing literature that has explored Obama's racial discourse (as presented in the literature review section above) but neglected CG-based textual analysis.

The corpus comprises Obama's memoir *A Promised Land*. To ensure thematic relevance, a purposive sampling strategy is employed to select relevant excerpts where Blackness identity is prominent. Passages are identified through keyword searches (e.g., "Black," "African American," "Blackness," "Africa") and close reading. The unit of analysis is the grammatical clause or sentence containing racialized discourse, enabling fine-grained examination of construal.

The procedure for data analysis consists of three main steps. The first step is the initial reading and thematic coding. Relevant excerpts were read to identify themes related to Blackness and African (American) identity. Passages were selected based on depth of reference to racial/Blackness experience. The second step is to analyze each excerpt to identify how construal operations (profiling and trajector/landmark alignment) function to construct the salience of Blackness. The third step is to synthesize the results to explore patterns in Obama's linguistic construction of Blackness—how he foregrounds certain racial narratives, profiles aspects of identity, and positions himself and others in relation to racialized experiences.

However, the limitations of the study stem from the fact that the scope is restricted to Langacker's prominence operations, excluding other construal dimensions such as specificity, focusing, and perspective. Despite this, the methodology offers a replicable

framework for examining racial salience in autobiographical discourse through cognitive grammar.

Analysis and Findings

The analysis focuses on profiling, and trajector/landmark (TR/LM) alignment to understand how Black identity and related social issues are conceptualized and framed within each excerpt.

Excerpt 1: Blackness in the U.S.

The following excerpt includes three rhetorical questions asked by Obama that clearly reflect his conceptualization and racial position towards Blackness:

1. Why did Blacks play professional basketball but not coach it? What did that girl from school mean when she said she didn't think of me as Black? Why were all the Black men in action movies switchblade-wielding lunatics except for maybe the one decent Black guy—the sidekick, of course—who always seemed to end up getting killed? (Obama, 2020, p. 8)

The first question is “*Why did Blacks play professional basketball but not coach it?*” First, in terms of profiling, this question accesses American players, American coaches, and American sports as the maximal scopes in the domains of the expressions’ matrixes. The portions that are put ‘on stage’ as the immediate scopes in all accessed domains are American basketball players, American basketball coaches, and American basketball. The profile in which Obama’s rhetorical question designates is ‘African American basketball players’.

Second, in terms of trajector/landmark alignment, the question profiles two relationships: ‘professional playing of basketball’ and ‘coaching basketball’. Within each relationship, ‘African American players’ are made prominent differently. Within the first coordinated clause, Obama profiles “Blacks” as the primary

focus in relation to 'professional basketball playing' through the use of an affirmative clause (i.e. Blacks played professional basketball). Similarly, in the second clause, the same profile is made salient (Blacks) however through negation as they did not coach it, reflecting on the exclusion of African Americans from the position of authority and strategy within the domain of sports.

Finally, this question highlights a perceived disparity in the domain of professional basketball concerning the roles occupied by Black individuals. From a construal perspective, the question frames a specific social observation: the presence of Black individuals in the role of 'player' juxtaposed with their perceived absence in the role of 'coach'. This construal does not merely describe two separate situations but actively contrasts them, setting up an expectation of symmetry (if present as players, why not as coaches?) and then highlighting the violation of that expectation.

As for the second rhetorical question ("*What did that girl from school mean when she said she didn't think of me as Black?*"), Obama profiles aspects of his personality that are not part of being a Black person, however from the viewpoint of some girl from school. Here, Obama recalls being asked by the girl that; although he is supposed to be Black, she didn't think he was one. This implies stereotyping of Black people in America as sharing the same traits, in which Obama does not conform to. In other words, Obama foregrounds 'the girl's perception' of him as opposing his identity, highlighting how Obama is socially categorized relative to Blackness. This reflects how individuals in America may be judged because of their racial identity imposed to them by social categorizations.

From a trajector/landmark perspective, Obama's second question profiles a relationship of (not) belonging, in which Obama (i.e. "*me*") is the trajector; the primary focus. The girl's statement designates the relationship of exclusion. In other words, Obama is made salient as a primary focus; however, in being excluded which is marked by the negation "*didn't think of me as....*" This relational expression has only one single primary focal participant, which is Obama being excluded from a backgrounded group of individuals:

the Blacks. Hence, Obama is made prominent in relation to being excluded as an African American stereotype individual, however, from ‘other’s’ perspective.

In the third rhetorical question ("*Why were all the Black men in action movies switchblade-wielding lunatics except for maybe the one decent Black guy—the sidekick, of course—who always seemed to end up getting killed?*"), Obama criticizes the stereotypical and limited representation of Black men within the specific domain of action movies. The construal adopted by the question frames the portrayal of Black men in this genre as overwhelmingly negative and monolithic ("*all... switchblade-wielding lunatics*"). This initial, sweeping generalization establishes a dominant, negative pattern. The question then introduces an exception ("*except for maybe the one decent Black guy*"), but immediately constrains this exception by assigning it a subordinate role ("*the sidekick, of course*") and a negative fate ("*always seemed to end up getting killed*").

Again, in terms of salience, first, Obama’s third question profiles the kinds of movie roles dedicated to Black actors, hence, reflecting the stereotyping of racial Black identity in the American society. From the domain of American action movies, the question activates leading and second role actors as the maximal scope. However, what is activated within the expression’s immediate scope and foregrounded is the kind of roles assigned to Black actors. Within this immediate scope, what is profiled is the ‘dangerous, lunatic, and gangster movie roles’ assigned exclusively to Black actors, affirmed by the use of the quantifier “*all.*” Yet, there is another profile through which Obama refers to an exception to the rule, marked by “*except for maybe the one decent Black guy.*” Unfortunately, it is immediately undercut by the parenthetical "*the sidekick, of course,*" which foregrounds the character's secondary status, and the final clause, "*who always seemed to end up getting killed,*" foregrounding the character's death as the central focus of this exceptional portrayal. This complex profiling suggests that even when deviating from the primary negative stereotype, the representation remains confined to marginal roles and tragic

outcomes, effectively profiling Black male characters within a very narrow and negative range of possibilities within the action movie domain.

Moreover, in terms of trajector/landmark alignment, Obama's third rhetorical question of excerpt 1 regarding the domain of action movies has a layered salient structure. While the preposition "*in*" in "*Black men in action movies*" profiles a non-processual locative relationship where "*the Black men*" act as trajector (located entity) and "*action movies*" as landmark (reference location), the full clause elevates the entire nominal phrase "*all the Black men in action movies*" to become the primary trajector – the entity being characterized. The landmark is not the movies themselves but the complex attributive relationship profiled by the predicate: the negative stereotype ("*switchblade-wielding lunatics*") applied to the majority, contrasted with the marginalized exception ("*the one decent Black guy*") whose subordinate role ("*sidekick*") and fatal outcome ("*getting killed*") are foregrounded as defining features.

Excerpt 2: Framing Obama's Racial Identity

In another excerpt, Obama pictures how he was framed through a series of externally imposed labels originating from a specific political opponent ("*the Rush camp*"). Right after Obama announced his 2008 presidential run, rumors questioning his identity and background began. For example, he was labeled as an "*outsider*," criticized as being supported "*by white folks*," and attacked of belonging to "*Harvard elitist*." The Rush camp specifically refers to supporters and listeners of influential conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh. Limbaugh's show became a primary vehicle for promoting narratives designed to undermine Obama based on racial accounts:

2. ... the rumblings from the Rush camp began: *Obama's an outsider; he's backed by white folks; he's a Harvard elitist. And that name—is he even Black?* (Obama, 2020, p. 37)

In terms of profiling and trajector/landmark alignment in this quote, Obama is made prominent in terms of being the profile and the trajector, reflecting on rumors about his racial identity. In the “*Obama’s an outsider*” rumor, Obama is profiled and made salient as a trajector (primary focus) in terms of not belonging to a social group (the profile’s maximal scope). Determining the immediate scope and landmarks for this profile remains challenging, as it may refer to more than one conceptual reference point. First, Obama (trajector) may be aligned against a landmark of American political figures, leaning to his perceived inexperience and obscurity in 2008. Here, his political newness is positioned as deviant against established norms. Second, Obama (trajector) may be profiled against a landmark of the African American community, emphasizing his biracial heritage (a Kenyan father and white American mother), non-U.S. mainland upbringing (Hawaii/Indonesia), and Ivy League education—traits positioned as atypical (trajectory/landmark misalignment) for Black Americans. Third, Obama (trajector) may be also contrasted with a landmark of American cultural/national mainstream, highlighting his childhood outside the continental U.S. as incongruent with conventional markers of ‘Americanness.’

In the “*he’s backed by white folks*” rumor, Obama is both the profile and the trajector. In terms of profiling, Obama is made salient through being conceptualized as the one presidential nominee that is supported by white Americans. Such profile questions him being belonging to Black Americans. At the same time, Obama is assigned primary focus (tr) against the white citizens (lm) as the secondary focus. This second rumor profiles a relationship in which white American voters are supporting Obama. The passive voice here designates the patient (Obama) as the focal figure in the relationship against the agent (“*white folks*”), designating a secondary focus. Hence, a reconfiguration of conceptual prominence.

Additionally, in the third rumor (“*he’s a Harvard elitist*”), Obama is again both the profile and the trajector. He is made conceptually salient (profiled) through association with an elite, Ivy

League background (Harvard). The landmark here is the stereotype of elitism, or more specifically, a non-populist, intellectually distant, and upper-class identity—which contrasts with more relatable, grassroots, or working-class models of Blackness or political identity. Here, “*Harvard elitist*” profiles Obama in contrast to a culturally accessible and familiar American identity. His education becomes the relational base against which his authenticity as a representative of everyday Americans (especially African Americans) is questioned.

The three rumors of excerpt 2, then, are followed by a question (“*And that name—is he even Black?*”). This question profiles the name ‘Barack Hussein Obama.’ Of course Obama’s name is made the prominent entity by means of being the profile and the trajector. The question profiles the name of Obama as one aspect of his identity, focusing attention on the Arabic (“*Hussein*”) and Kenyan (“*Obama*”) roots of his racial identity. This highlights how the language used by Obama’s opponents was used to selectively profile him as an excluded; hence, an “*outsider*.” Likewise, his name is conceptually made the primary entity being evaluated or positioned against the landmark, which is the artificial, exclusionary standard of authentic Blackness rooted in the stereotypical ‘Black’ names. By positioning Obama’s name (trajector) as deviant against this landmark, the question implies that he falls outside genuine Black identity.

Excerpt 3: Reframing Black Identity

On another occasion, Obama is reflecting on the time he was a community organizer in Chicago during the 1980s. He specifically refers to the Black working-class community members (“*Through them*”) whom he met and worked with as a community organizer. Through contact with these people, Obama had the opportunity to understand his “*racial identity*.” This quote grabs Obama’s lifelong quest for belonging:

3. Through them, I resolved the lingering questions of my racial identity. For it turned out there was no single

way to be Black; just trying to be a good man was enough. (Obama, 2020, p. 15)

Here, the conceptual base in which the most prominent entity is chosen is the maximal scope of an identity as a whole. Within this, the immediate scope in which the profile is put into focus is Blackness as a racial identity. The profile foregrounded within this immediate scope is the realization of Black identity's inherent diversity – the understanding that there is "*no single way to be Black*". This non-monolithic conception, resolving Obama's conflict by asserting that striving to be a good man is sufficient, is the specific, salient concept designated within the domain of Blackness. Furthermore, in terms of trajector/landmark alignment, Obama's reflection on identity demonstrates a conceptual realignment through trajector/landmark organization. The trajector is Obama's evolving conception of his racial identity, which is placed in primary focus throughout the quote. Initially, the landmarks—those entities serving as conceptual reference points—are socially imposed norms and reductive stereotypes of Blackness, which frame Black identity as narrow and monolithic. Obama's early conflict stems from the perception that his personal history does not align with these standards. However, the realization that "*there was no single way to be Black*" signals a reconstrual of the landmark itself: Black identity is no longer tied to essentialist notions but is reframed as multifaceted and internally diverse. The concluding clause—"*just trying to be a good man was enough*"—invokes yet another shift in landmark, this time toward an ethical or moral standard. The final alignment conceptualizes Obama's identity as valid not because it conforms to a fixed model of Blackness, but because it reflects integrity and human decency.

Excerpt 4: Profiling Black Aspiration

Within a chapter titled "*Yes we can*," Obama describes the attitudes of Black Americans towards him winning the presidency of 2008:

4. Nothing in Black people's experience told them that it might be possible for one of their own to win a major party nomination, much less the presidency of the United States. In the minds of many, what Michelle and I had accomplished was already something of a miracle. To aspire beyond that seemed foolish, a flight too close to the sun. (Obama, 2020, p. 116)

In this quote, Obama foregrounds multiple profiles, each for a specific reason. First, in the phrase "*Nothing in Black people's experience ... possible*," the conceptual base is the totality of African American historical and lived experiences, which background historical enslavement, racial inequality, and imposed negative stereotypes. Within this base, the immediate scope is the collective memory of systemic exclusion from political engagement. The profile placed in focus within this scope is the cognitive barrier of impossibility—an internalized sense that such progress was unimaginable. Second, in "*what Michelle and I had accomplished was already something of a miracle*," the maximal scope remains the same: the African American historical experiences. As for the immediate scope, it now shifts to Obama and Michelle's shared political achievement—his nomination and eventual election—foregrounding a rupture in that historical pattern. Thus, Obama's expression profiles their exceptional achievement against the backdrop of collective disbelief. Third, Obama's quote then ends with another shift in prominence. Although he acknowledges the extraordinary nature of his success, he turns attention to the psychological tension between aspirational hope and inherited historical trauma. In "*To aspire beyond that seemed foolish, a flight too close to the sun*," the act of aspiring is profiled as risky and potentially self-destructive. Here, ambition is conceptualized as dangerously exceeding what history has shown to be possible, suggesting that further aspiration risks a fall due to perceived overreach.

Besides, in terms of trajectory/landmark alignment, first, Obama's quote designates primary focus (the trajectory) on the

impossibility for a Black individual to win—whether something as significant as the U.S. presidency or even a party nomination. This trajector is made prominent against the landmark of “*Black people’s experience*,” which implies a historical narrative of systemic racial oppression. Additionally, in “*In the minds of many, what Michelle and I had accomplished was already something of a miracle*,” the preposition “*In*” profiles a non-processual locative relationship where ‘Obama and Michelle’s exceptional political journey’ acts as trajector (located entity) and the “*minds of many*” Black people as landmark (reference location). In other words, Obama and Michelle’s political achievement is profiled as miraculous relative to Black collective expectation. Finally, across all three sentences, Obama’s use of conceptual alignment effectively reinforces the emotional and cognitive complexity of Black aspiration in the face of historically systemic limits.

Excerpt 5: Othering and Delegitimization

In this excerpt, Obama is presenting a number of false claims imposed upon him from his opponents during the 2008 presidential campaign that are strategically profile a specific, damaging aspect of his identity or past, deliberately selecting facets designed to evoke fear, distrust, or otherness within voters:

5. There were claims that I wasn’t an American citizen (helpfully illustrated by a picture of me wearing an African outfit at my Kenyan half brother’s wedding). As the campaign progressed, more lurid falsehoods were circulated... that I had dealt drugs, that I had worked as a gay prostitute, that I had Marxist ties. (Obama, 2020, p.132)

Profiling is used here to show how Obama was negatively portrayed based on racially, damaging, false persona for him. In the first sentence, ‘Obama’s otherness’ or the delegitimization of Obama’s ‘Americanness’ is profiled, bringing into focus, the challenge to his identity and belonging within the frame of Americanness. Additionally, the sentence profiles a relationship of incompatibility

in which Obama's citizenship is made prominent as being assigned the primary focus (trajector) against a visual cue: a picture of him wearing an African outfit at his Kenyan half brother's wedding (landmark). The picture is the reference point that suggests 'foreignness.' It is assigned a secondary focus as it is presented as evidence that contradicts the trajector's claim to legitimate American citizenship.

Moreover, in terms of trajector/landmark alignment, the second sentence profiles a relationship of attribution or association in which the landmarks (specific falsehoods) are being attributed to the trajector (Obama's character) to negatively define him. In other words, the landmarks are the specific falsehoods themselves (dealing drugs, being a gay prostitute, having Marxist ties). These are the concrete points against which Obama's character as the trajector is being measured. However, in terms of profiling, the sentence profiles the negative assessment of Obama's character, aiming to delegitimize him by linking his moral character (trajector) to these specific negative actions/associations (landmarks). Thus, Obama's moral character is profiled through association with highly negative categories: criminal activity ("*dealt drugs*"), socially stigmatized work ("*gay prostitute*"), and radical political affiliation ("*Marxist ties*"). Each falsehood adds a layer to this fabricated negative profile, aimed at undermining his character and suitability for office. The overall prominence of these specific portions of Obama's conceptual content implies an association between being an African Black foreigner and being immoral in terms of criminality, social deviance, and political extremism, or simply NOT American.

Excerpt 6: Racial Dynamics in Obama

In the following excerpt, Obama is commenting on the fallout from Reverend Jeremiah Wright's controversial sermons becoming public during the 2008 campaign. Wright was the pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago's south side. He had a kind of relationship with Obama. Wright "officiated at Obama's wedding and baptized his daughters, and was the Illinois senator's spiritual guide for decades" (Nasaw, 2008). During Obama's 2008

presidential campaign, Reverend Wright made some incendiary statements that had been a source of anxiety to the campaign. Some of these comments include (1) “God damn America... for treating our citizens as less than human,” condemning America for systemic racism and dehumanization of its Black citizens, (2) “America's chickens are coming home to roost” in the context of 9/11 and U.S. foreign policy, blaming America for the attacks and showing a lack of sympathy for the terrorism victims, and (3) “Hillary ain't never been called a nigger ... never had her people defined as non-persons,” painting Wright and by association Obama as radical, fueled by fears, and consumed by racial anger (Nasaw, 2008).

Obama’s mentioning of Reverend Wright’s angrily ‘racial’ comments as presented below in excerpt 6 reveals the fact that he acknowledges the anger rooted in the Black experience that Wright expressed, even while condemning the specific inflammatory statements. He explains the complex racial dynamics at play, contrasting Black and white perspectives on race in America:

6. I knew all too well the occasional spasms of anger within the Black community—my community—that Reverend Wright was channeling. I did know how differently Black and white folks still viewed issues of race in America, regardless of how much else they had in common. (Obama, 2020, p. 141)

The first sentence (“*I knew all ... channeling*”) evokes the conceptual base (maximal scope) of Obama’s knowledge of the entire history of race relations in America, encompassing slavery, systemic discrimination, ongoing inequalities, cultural differences, his personal identity as a Black man (“*my community*”), and Reverend Wright's role as a channel for Black anger. Within this lies the immediate scope of Obama’s conceptualization in which the profile is put ‘on stage’ as the most salient entity. The immediate scope includes the “*spasms of anger*” within the Black community, channeled by Wright. Accordingly, the profile in the first sentence is Obama’s internal state of knowing and the nature of the anger within racial America.

As for the trajector/landmark alignment, the first sentence profiles three relationships that designate primary and secondary focus on different entities. First, "I knew ..." profiles a cognitive relation of knowing, linking Obama (trajector) to the conceptual content of the anger and its channeling (landmark). Second, "spasms of anger within the Black community" profiles a locative/possessive relation, indicating that the anger (trajector) is contained within or originates from the Black community (landmark). Third, "Reverend Wright was channeling" profiles a dynamic, active relation where Reverend Wright (trajector) directs or gives expression to the anger (landmark).

In the second sentence of excerpt 6, Obama's knowledge of a persistent difference in perspective between two racial groups (Blacks and Whites) regarding racial anger is profiled; being made the primary concept designated. The maximal scope activated in this sentence is complex. It encompasses Obama's total knowledge societal issues in America. The immediate scope, then, narrowly includes his knowledge of the two distinct groups of the American society ("*Black and white folks*"), their current state of differing racial perceptions ("*how differently... still viewed*"), the subject of these views ("*issues of race in America*"), and their shared commonalities ("*regardless of how much else they had in common*").

In terms of trajector/landmark alignment, the sentence profiles three relationships. First, "*I did know...*" profiles a cognitive relation of knowing, similar to the first expression, linking Obama (trajector) to the observed difference in viewpoints (landmark). Second, "*Black and white folks...viewed issues of race*" profiles a cognitive/perceptual relation, where the two groups (trajector) engage in the act of viewing/interpreting "*issues of race*" (landmark). The adverb "*differently*" highlights the contrastive nature of this relation. Third, "*regardless of how much else they had in common*" sets up a concessive relation, acknowledging shared attributes while emphasizing that these do not negate the profiled difference in racial perspectives. It serves as a backgrounding element that highlights the salience of the profiled difference.

Excerpt 7: Obama's Paradox

In the following quote, Obama is acknowledging how his racial and cultural background—being the son of a Black Kenyan father and a white American mother—shaped perceptions of his presidency. Supporters saw his identity as an asset, allowing him to understand global perspectives better. Critics weaponized his background, framing him as "un-American" or even a threat, reflecting deep-seated racial anxieties in U.S. politics:

7. That dual vision, as much as my skin color, distinguished me from previous presidents. For my supporters, it was a defining foreign policy strength, enabling me to amplify America's influence around the world and anticipate problems that might arise from ill-considered policies. For my detractors, it was evidence of weakness, raising the possibility that I might hesitate to advance American interests because of a lack of conviction, or even divided loyalties. For some of my fellow citizens, it was far worse than that. Having the son of a black African with a Muslim name and socialist ideas ensconced in the White House with the full force of the U.S. government under his command was precisely the thing they wanted to be defended against. (Obama, 2020, p. 310)

In terms of salience, Obama's excerpt focuses on the different attitudes towards his presidency based on race. In the first sentence ("*That dual ...presidents*"), the conceptual base that is activated encompasses Obama's identity (maximal scope). Construed more narrowly, the immediate scope in active domains that is identified includes two aspects of Obama's identity: his racial and physical aspects of his identity. Within this onstage region, attention is directed more specifically to Obama's biracial identity ("*That dual vision*") and Obama's skin color ("*my skin color*"). Moreover, this first sentence profiles a relationship of asymmetric comparison in which Obama is a deviational trajector relative to a landmark of

normative presidents, with differentiation profiled in domains like race or ancestry.

Additionally, through the rest of the excerpt, Obama is presenting three different attitudes towards him and his presidency based on racial categorizations, each is presented in a sentence. In all three sentences, the trajector is the same: 'Obama's biracial identity and skin color' is assigned the primary focus. First, for his supporters ("*For my supporters ... ill-considered policies*"), Obama's biracial identity as well as his skin color (trajector) are conceptualized as an instrument or source that positively interacts with foreign policy goals (landmark), enhancing them. It's an enabling force. In other words, the relationship that is profiled in this sentence is one of agency or potency: the trajector (Obama's biracial nature and skin color) acts upon the landmark (foreign policy/influence) to produce a beneficial result. Also, in terms of profiling, the entity that is made prominent in this sentence is Obama's potency for the U.S. foreign policy based on his biracial, Black identity. Here, the maximal scope encompasses the global geopolitics and U.S. policy objectives. Within this conceptual base is the immediate scope of the capability of handling U.S. geopolitics and foreign U.S. policy. According to Obama's supporters, it is his biracial identity and skin color that is positively distinguishes Obama from other U.S. presidents in dealing with the U.S. foreign policy; hence, a point of strength.

Second, the sentence "*For my detractors ... divided loyalties*" profiles a relationship of weakness and risk, in which the trajector (Obama's racial identity and skin color) is assigned primary focus against "American interests," "conviction," and "loyalties" as the landmark. In other words, Obama's racial identity and skin color as the trajector is conceptualized as a cause or source of a potential failure relative to the landmark of advancing American interests. It introduces doubt (lack of conviction) or conflict (divided loyalties) between the trajector and the landmark; hence, a relationship of threat and deficit. The profiled entity, however, is Obama's impotency and disloyalty with regards to American interests.

Third, in “*For some of my fellow citizens ... defended against*” sentence, the profiled relationship is one of existential threat (something “*far worse*” than weakness; something to be “*defended against*”). On the one hand, the trajector is Obama himself, specifically defined by his identity (“*son of a black African*”, “*Muslim name*”, “*socialist ideas*”) combined with his position (“*ensconced in the White House*”, “*full force of the U.S. government under his command*”). On the other hand, the landmark is “*The White House*” and “*the full force of the U.S. government*” – representing American power, sovereignty, and identity. This construal is the most complex. Obama's identity (trajector) is profiled as *intrinsically antagonistic* to the landmark (the White House/US government as symbolizing the nation). His presence in the landmark position is itself the threat (“*precisely the thing they wanted to be defended against*”). The trajector is not just incompatible with the landmark; it's seen as *occupying* and *misusing* the landmark. The relationship is one of profanation or usurpation. Thus, the profiled entity in this sentence is Obama's incompatibility and inherent menace.

Discussion

This study examines Barack Obama's strategic use of linguistic and cognitive operations in *A Promised Land* to construct and navigate the multifaceted patterns of Black identity. The key research question seeks to uncover the complex ways in which Blackness is presented cognitively salient through Obama's narrative choices, and how he reasonably foregrounds racial memories and experiences to navigate the inherent tensions between his ‘Self’, the historical collective racial memory, and political responsibility. The findings reveal a dynamic interaction of linguistic foregrounding and conceptual framing, revealing Obama's strategic engagement with and redefinition of Blackness within the complex American socio-political landscape.

Results Related to Research Question (1): How is Blackness cognitively and linguistically construed in *A Promised Land*, and

what aspects of racial identity does Obama foreground most prominently?

This question is concerned with the linguistic and conceptual mechanisms through which Obama constructs Blackness, with particular attention to which elements of racial identity are made prominent throughout the memoir.

The data analysis reveals that, in *A Promised Land*, Obama utilizes linguistic mechanisms as well as cognitive operations to construe Blackness through reflecting its systemic implications, societal racial perceptions, and the personal experiences that shape its conceptualizations. A key finding is concerned with how Obama foregrounds the systemic racial disparity through portraying the truth about the Blacks' engagement in playing versus coaching basketball and the stereotypical roles assigned to Blacks in Hollywood movies, focusing attention on a striking racial asymmetry and imbalance of patterns of inclusion/exclusion of Black Americans versus White Americans.

Additionally, Obama's language cognitively foregrounds the social categorization and stereotyping of Black identity within the American society. This is evident when he recalls being told by a school girl that she never thought of him as 'Black.' As the analysis reveals, Obama positions himself as the focal point of a racial stereotypical judgement that he is not Black based on fixed racial perceptions. Likewise, through focusing attention on the "*switchblade-wielding lunatics*" as the typical movie roles assigned to Black men, Obama is exposing racial stereotypes of African Americans in popular culture. These two instances reveal Obama's strategic combination of personal accounts of his racial identity and the collective perception of Blackness in America.

The study also reflects how Obama bravely foregrounds the insidious attempts of his political rivals to racially frame him in terms of an 'outsider.' For example, in the "*Rush camp*" rumors, Obama uncovers the societal racial labels (e.g., "*backed by white folks*," a "*Harvard elitist*") that function as a mechanism of political

othering in order to undermine his Black identity. Through such rumors, Obama exemplifies how his political adversaries use linguistic profiling to construct a false, fabricated image of him based on racial accounts. This highlights an important aspect of Obama's self-representation. The foregrounding of such false "*rumblings*" reveals how Obama resists external narratives designed to delegitimize his identity and, by extension, his political aspirations. Thus, his rivals' strategic use of language to create a trajector/landmark 'misalignment' between Obama and a perceived authentic Black identity underscores the political stakes embedded in the construal of racial identity.

More importantly, the findings reveal that Obama's narrative makes prominent a new definition of Blackness in America beyond the monolithic civil war racial Blackness. In so doing, Obama includes his own experience, stating that "*there was no single way to be Black; just trying to be a good man was enough*" which represents a significant conceptual realignment of American racial accounts. In this context, Obama shifts the landmark from the fixed, externally imposed stereotypes of being a Black American to a morally multifaceted and internal account of a Black identity. Such re-construal not only resolves Obama's personal identity conflict but also provides a powerful counter-narrative to the rigid racial categorizations prevalent in the American society.

Finally, the study reveals Obama's foregrounding of the tension between historical constraints for political aspirations and miraculous possibilities within the Black experience. The assertion that "*Nothing in Black people's experience told them that it might be possible for one of their own to win a major party nomination, much less the presidency of the United States*" rightly encapsulates the profound cognitive obstacles engendered by centuries of systemic marginalization and discrimination. Yet, his own success, as "*something of a miracle,*" signals a significant divergence from this path of history. The intricate dynamic of historical burden and the door of unexpected opportunity opening is Obama's vision of Black ambition, working within the contours of historical context while at

the same time moving toward a future once unthinkable. The characterization of his success as a “*miracle*” highlights the exceptional quality of overcoming ingrained historical constraints.

Results Related to Research Question (2): What does the salience of Blackness in *A Promised Land* reveal about Obama's role in (re)defining Blackness within the context of the American political landscape?

This question probes the larger significance of Obama's construal of race, pointing out how his narrative contributes to the continued re-definition of Black identity within the political culture of the United States.

Obama's narrative in *A Promised Land* is more than a mere description of himself; it is an active performative undertaking that significantly influences the (re)shaping of Blackness in American politics. The results indicate that Obama plays a crucial role in challenging racial stereotypes using autobiographical narratives. Through the open discussion of his experience with racial labeling by his opponents and the internal conflict over his identity, he offers a counter-narrative to common stereotypes. His own life journey, which progresses from the struggle with a high school girl's remark to the deep appreciation of Blackness in its complexity, is a strong statement about the constraints imposed by inflexible racial labels. He takes his own life experience as a case study to analyze and extend the meaning of being Black in America.

Further, Obama's rhetoric constitutes a discreet means of addressing and reclaiming identity in political communication. Confronted with overt efforts to disqualify him based on race, especially following the “*Rush camp*” accusations, the linguistic strategies of Obama demonstrate a deliberate effort to forge his self-portrayal. Obama does not avoid such challenges; instead, he actively addresses them by usually reframing the debate's terms. This proactive reclamation of his identity illustrates a profound skill in strategic self-representation, wherein language functions as an

instrument for affirming agency and authenticity in the face of external influences.

The analysis of data demonstrates that Obama's narrative is significant in stretching the definition of Blackness. His final assertion that "*being a good man was enough*" just by "*trying*" goes beyond restrictive, essentialist notions of racial identity. By making moral and ethical character a defining feature of his personal identity, he implicitly advances a broader and more inclusive definition of Blackness—one not reducible to external perceptions, racial histories, or stereotypical characteristics, but to personal integrity and common human values. Obama's narrative also adroitly spans the space between individual and collective identity.

Though his experiences are intensely personal, they shed light on the general historical and contemporary conditions of Black Americans. He employs his own life to examine the inherent tensions between individual identity and the racial collective memory, especially in the context of political ambition. In describing the 'cognitive barrier of impossibility' among Black Americans to the prospects of a Black presidency, he relates his own achievement to a collective historical tension. This enables him to present a more subtle and sophisticated understanding of Blackness, one that is attuned to historical conditions but also, at the same time, inspiring a future in which individual success can transform collective potentialities. Ultimately, the study firmly highlights the fundamental importance of language as an intellectual instrument in Obama's forging of Black identity.

The persistent use of linguistic and cognitive mechanisms—such as profiling and trajector/landmark alignment—is no accident; it is a key element in Obama's construction of Blackness in the minds of his audience. Such lexical options are authoritative means of racial perception and identity construction, especially in situations where political communication necessitates strategic self-presentation and interpretive flexibility. Obama's proficiency on these instruments enables him to articulate his multifaceted identity while

simultaneously producing the wider cultural representation of Blackness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study illuminates the profound and multifaceted ways in which Barack Obama, in *A Promised Land*, strategically employs linguistic and cognitive tools to construe and redefine Black identity within the American political landscape. By meticulously foregrounding systemic disparities, challenging pervasive stereotypes, navigating external framings, and ultimately expanding the very definition of Blackness to encompass a more inclusive and morally grounded understanding, Obama's narrative serves as a powerful testament to the dynamic interplay between individual self-representation and collective racial consciousness. His use of language not only shapes perceptions of Blackness but also bridges the historical tensions between aspiration and constraint, ultimately offering a nuanced vision of identity that transcends monolithic categorizations and underscores the enduring power of language as a cognitive tool in shaping both personal and political realities.

Further Research and Limitations

Although this study gives a comprehensive view on how Cognitive Grammar can reflect Obama's perceptions of American systemic conception of Blackness, his racial identity as viewed by others and himself, and his redefinition of being a Black American, it is not without limitations. The findings of the study suggest possible recommendations for further research. First, as the present study focuses only on one aspect of construal, prominence, future research may include other construal operations such as specificity, focusing, or perspective, for deep construal analysis. Second, the corpus of the present study comprises only one written production by Obama. Further research may include different genres such as speeches, interviews, or even his other memoirs to contrast his strategies across different contexts. Last but not least, other research

may utilize corpus-linguistic tools to enable larger-scale pattern identification and quantitative validation, offering greater analytical depth.

References

- Bien, D. H. (2021). Construal and its representative forms in cognitive linguistics. *Dalat University Journal of Science*, 11(3), 3–27. [https://doi.org/10.37569/DalatUniversity.11.3.697\(2021\)](https://doi.org/10.37569/DalatUniversity.11.3.697(2021))
- Brøndal, J. (2024). Political autobiography and race: The case of Barack Obama. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 39(2), 499–528. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2024.2394330>
- Browse, S. (2018). From functional to cognitive grammar in stylistic analysis of Golding's *The Inheritors*. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 47(2), pp. 121–146. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jls-2018-2003>
- Evans, V. (2007). *A Glossary of Cognitive Linguistics*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh.
- Hart, C. (2013). Event-Construal in Press Reports of Violence in Political Protests: A Cognitive Linguistic Approach to CDA. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 12(3), pp. 400–423. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.12.3.05har>
- Hart, C. (2021). "28 Palestinians die": A cognitive grammar analysis of mystification in press coverage of state violence on the Gaza border. In M. Giovanelli, C. Harrison, & L. Nuttall (Eds.), *New directions in cognitive grammar and style* (pp. 93–115). Bloomsbury.
- Langacker, R.W. (1987). *Foundations of cognitive grammar, Vol. I: Theoretical prerequisites*. Stanford University Press: Stanford.
- Langacker, R.W. (1991). *Foundations of cognitive grammar, Vol. II: Descriptive Application*. Stanford University Press: Stanford.

- Langacker, R.W. (2008). *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Langacker, R. W. (2013). *Essentials of Cognitive Grammar*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Langacker, R. W. (2017). *Ten Lectures on the Basics of Cognitive Grammar*. Koninklijke Brill NV: The Netherlands.
- Nasaw, D. (2008, March 18). Controversial comments made by Rev Jeremiah Wright. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/18/barackobama.uselections20083>
- Obama, B. (2020). *A Promised Land*. Penguin Random House: USA.
- Pitcher, B. (2010). Obama and the Politics of blackness: Antiracism in the “post-black” Conjuncture. *Souls*, 12(4), 313-322. DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2010.526046
- Pleyer, M., Schneider, C. (2014). Construal and Comics: The Multimodal Autobiography of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. In C. Harrison, L. Nuttall, P. Stockwell & W. Yuan (Eds), *Cognitive Grammar in Literature*, pp. 35-52. John Benjamins: Amsterdam.
- Sikanku, G. E. (2023). The Obama creed in retrospect: Communicative frames and representations from an Afrocentric perspective. *Communication and the Public*, 8(4), 324–342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20570473231195919>
- Smith, D. L. (2025). “There’s no longer room for any excuses”: Obama, Morehouse College, and the rhetoric of Black male vulnerability. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 111(2), 220–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2025.2467166>

- Ullmann, S. (2015). A cognitive CDA-approach to the Arab revolutions: Construal operations in international press language. *York Papers in Linguistics*, 2, 103–113.
- Xing, X. & Zhang, L. (2018). A Cognitive Construal of English News Headlines: Prominence dimension. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 8(8), pp. 1080-1086. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0808.24>