

Chapter 6

Is 'No One As Irish as Barack O'Bama'?

Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain

You don't believe me, I hear you say
But Barack's as Irish, as was JFK
His granddaddy's daddy came from Moneygall
A small Irish village, well known to you all
Toor a loo, toor a loo, toor a loo, toor a lama
There's no one as Irish As Barack O'Bama
- The Corrigan Brothers (with Shay Black)

On May 23, 2011, Barack Obama visited Ireland for the first time and amidst an enthusiastic crowd of 50,000 people gathered in College Green, Dublin began his speech thus: "My name is Barack Obama of the Moneygall Obamas. I've come home to find the apostrophe we lost somewhere along the way" (RTE 23/6/2011). The crowd went wild despite the rain and high winds of the classic Irish summer. Obama's trip to Ireland, his warm embrace by the Irish nation as a 'true son of Ireland' (Lord 2011), and his own recognition of the trip to Ireland as a trip home, all served to underscore not Obama's roots and his newfound Irishness. Why does being Irish matter for Barack Obama? What do people in Ireland see when they look at him? Is his biraciality a factor?

Debates about what Barack Obama actually is racially tell us more about the state of racial thinking in the US and Ireland than they do about any racial reality that Obama represents as a multiracial man of both Kenyan and Irish ancestry. I argue that while some see Obama as the first Black president of the US and therefore a symbolic watershed in US race relations, it might be more realistic to recognize that Obama has been unique in his ability to use

flexible racialisation to make claims to Blackness, Whiteness, cosmopolitanism, and Irishness simultaneously. But what are the conditions and strategies that make this work?

This chapter focuses not on Obama's racial Blackness or mixedness but instead his Whiteness and specifically his Irishness through a content analysis, of print, television and popular cultural sources, from 2008-2011, of the discovery of his Irish ancestry and his recent visit to Ireland. ¹

It analyzes: 1) what commentators say about Obama's racial and ethnic identity, 2) Obama's own racial and ethnic claims and those made upon him, 3) his reception in the US in racial and ethnic terms focusing on when and where he is allowed to combine these various claims and why people allow him flexible racialisation, and 4) his recent visit to the Republic of Ireland to understand why Irish people are now willing to accept a Black person as authentically Irish thus allowing Obama to combine his Black race with Irish ethnicity.

Commentary on Obama's Racial and Ethnic Identity

When Barack Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States, he was most often touted as the first Black president and a symbol of

¹ Media and journalistic sources are analysed as data to better understand how collective social actors understand and come to identify themselves through discourse, particularly in relation to race. Race, as we know, is socially constructed and any understanding of race or by extension mixed race, must by definition be analyzed within specific social and cultural contexts as this chapter does. The research operates with an understanding that all social reality is mediated, including and especially ideas about race, which is considered not to be an empirical reality that can be measured by us out there. For more on this see: Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee. 2008. *The Media and Social Theory* or for a discussion specifically about race see: Lentin and Tittle. 2011. *The Crisis of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age*. (Chapter 2).

a post racial America inspiring new debates about the future of American race relations. Liberals and conservatives alike painted Obama as a collective symbol of American race relations resolved and for many this claim hinged on his Black background and his ability to point to having a Black father from Kenya. Ward Connerly, a Black conservative from California, famous for his attempts to overturn affirmative action, said, “(T)he presidential candidacy of Sen. Barack Obama is testimony that America is about ready to end the consideration of race in American life. In effect, he is the symbol of the American people ‘overcoming’ race.” (Belton 2008).

While Obama continues to identify himself as Black and has not officially identified as mixed race personally, politically or publicly, he continues to invoke **both** Whiteness and Blackness and the connections and experiences that come with them in his speeches, his public comments and books (see Ponzer chapter 3 in this volume).

Is Obama Black....enough?

Some African American political pundits have argued that Obama is not really Black due to historical experience, blood ancestry, political loyalties or social position. Debra Dickerson, a well-known African American writer, claimed that Obama was not Black on the grounds that he was not descended from slaves and did not represent the African American experience. Kimberly McClain DaCosta responded, “The bulk of people protesting against references to Obama as a black man, however, grant that he is ‘part’ black (by way of his father), but assert that because he also has a White mother it is not ‘accurate’ to call him black. He is in fact, ‘mixed’, they say....what I find

most interesting about the question of what racial label to assign Obama, is that we are asking the question at all” (DaCosta 2008: 1). Sociologists, who are at pains to point out that race is a socially constructed concept and not real, also weighed in. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in a discussion about the social significance of Barack Obama in August of 2008 described him as “black lite not because he is half-White, but because he has taken an almost raceless political stand and persona. This said, the legitimacy of Obama’s blackness should be judged by his politics and, in my view, his are ‘neo-mulatto’ politics” (Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

Others, including White political figures like former Governor of Illinois, Rod Blagojevich, were quoted as saying, “I’m blacker than Barack Obama. I shined shoes. I grew up in a five-room apartment. My father had a little Laundromat in a black community not far from where we lived” (Rabb 2010). Blackness, for Blagojevich, much like for Dickerson and Bonilla-Silva, was linked to social class, in particular poverty and economic struggle, and not skin color (For more discussion of class and Obama, see chapter 9). With the exception of DaCosta, all of these arguments essentialized race and linked Blackness to race/blood, specific political stances, and class/economic conditions or experiences.

Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the majority leader, stated that he believed Barack Obama could become the country’s first black president because he was light-skinned and had the advantage of “carrying no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one.” (Zeleny, 2010). Others agreed that Obama opened up the definition of Blackness and expanded it to represent a

much broader and more diverse community that could be considered essentially Black. Enid Logan wrote,

As for the issue of racial identity, I believe that what Obama is doing is opening up the space for new, expanded notions of blackness. The more time he spends in the national spotlight, the choices will hopefully, no longer only be to be seen as either a) “authentically black,” i.e. in all ways identified with “the hood,” poor blacks, and the “urban experience,” or as b) “not really black,” “honorary White,” “black lite” (to use Eduardo’s phrase), or “not black enough...Barack Obama is not simply a “Whitewashed” black man. He is, rather, someone who represents the increasing diversity of the black community. Not all of us are from the hood. Some of us are biracial. Increasing numbers have parents from the Caribbean or from Africa. Obama seems to represent a blackness that is cosmopolitan, global, progressive, multifaceted, and forward-looking (rather than primarily referencing slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and our glorious past as Kings and Queens in Africa). (Logan 2008).

While for some this was liberating, to open up blackness as an internally extremely diverse category, for others it threatened the core of African American political solidarity allowing some African Americans, many of whom are of mixed descent, to distance themselves from the ‘in the hood’ stereotypes of blackness.

As DaCosta noted, some felt that Obama is in fact racially mixed. His mixed race status allows him to serve as a bridge between groups and throughout his campaign to supersede race and racial issues. But Michelle Elam (2011) writes, “Obama may often invoke and exploit the appeal of American exceptionalism and the melting pot mythology, but so far he has not used his mixed-race status to herald any kind of post-race salvation” (Elam, 2011). Obama has been Black, not Black enough, White, not White enough and mixed. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that this is because Obama is different things to different people.

White Obama supporters like him because he is the first “black” leader they feel comfortable; because he does not talk about racism; because he tells them every time he can he is half-White (and it helps his father is from Kenya rather than from the South side of Chicago); because he is so “articulate” or, in Senator Biden’s words, echoed later by Karl Rove, Obama is “the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy” ... for blacks, Obama is a symbol of their possibilities. He is, as Obama has said of himself, their Joshua—the leader they hope will take them to the promised land of milk and honey. They read in between the lines (probably more than is there) and think he has a strong stance on race matters. ...Poor blacks believe Obama will bring economic and social change to them—higher wages, health care, etc., and, for elite blacks, Obama is a symbol and a confirmation of their own standing, politics, and even behavior and manners—the genteel, aristocratic character of the black elite. (Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

Therefore, Whites see a mixed race man raised by a White mother and White grandparents from Kansas – suitable Middle America. Asian Pacific Islanders from Hawai’i see a local guy who grew up on Oahu attending a predominantly API and Native Hawaiian school – Punaho. African Americans perhaps can relate to someone who has also undoubtedly experienced racism due to his physical appearance and who elects to identify with the Black community. But what of his Whiteness? His Whiteness and the case of his new found Irishness allows us perhaps to see the global, and I would argue more cosmopolitan, appeal of Barack Obama which is perhaps due not to his skin color, but down to his experience of being racially mixed – and to what George Kich calls, his ‘cognitive flexibility’ (Kich 1996:275).

Unpacking Obama’s Whiteness is informed by the discussion of his Blackness above because as always, race is hierarchical and relational at all times. His Whiteness (and Irishness) is unique and interesting because he is predominantly seen as Black.

Obama's Own Racial and Ethnic Claims

It is clear from the above that Obama, for many, does not measure up to their definitions of racial identity; this despite the fact that Barack Obama has clearly and consistently identified himself racially as a Black man. He married a Black woman, fathered Black children, belongs to a traditionally Black church, worked and lived on the south side of Chicago in a traditionally Black neighborhood, and recalls experiences of racism as a Black man. And yet, he is still not Black enough, mixed enough, or post-racial enough to suit many.

Barack Obama proudly writes about his mixed race ancestry and clearly identifies that he has a father from Kenya (read Black) and a White mother from Kansas and yet, he does not identify racially as mixed race. His multiplicity is often also linked to his class background, which allows him to make non-racial and non-ethnic claims to being a cosmopolitan citizen of the world.

Barack Obama's flexible racial and ethnic portrayal is often one he draws on himself and he does this to connect to different types of people. He is the first Black president for many African Americans; he is a local in Hawaii and understands many of the Asian Pacific Islander cultural traits of the Islands; he is mixed race commenting that 'I've got pieces of everybody in me' (Jordan 2007:2) and now he is ethnically Irish too.

What is fascinating about this is that Obama is involved in making multiple claims and many groups of people allow him to do so. Collective identities in the past have demanded of others that they choose identities to

be loyal to. In principle many people have multiple and flexible identities but in practice they are not allowed by others to claim them. Obama manages to do this easily and that is why it is important to examine how audiences receive Obama's racial and ethnic claims and how they authenticate or reject them.

Irish America and the Importance of O'Bama

It wasn't until 2007, during the lead up to his presidential campaign that Barack Obama discovered that he was of Irish descent. Stephen Neill, a local Anglican rector in Moneygall, County Offaly, Ireland "found that Obama's great-great grandfather, Falmouth Kearney, was reared in Moneygall and left for America in 1850, when he was 19"(Jordan 2007:1). Descended from a relatively well off (Kearney was a shoe maker) Protestant family in Offaly, Obama seemed to relish the fact that he was Irish commenting on St. Patrick's Day in 2009 to the Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) that, "... when I was a relatively unknown candidate for office, I didn't know about this part of my heritage, which would have been very helpful in Chicago. So I thought I was bluffing when I put the apostrophe after the O." (Rooney 2009

http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1889908_1893754_1893876,00.html#ixzz1Q0Mg4U2S).

Obama isn't kidding. When he invokes Irishness it gets votes and allows Irish Americans to connect with him in an ethnic way that they couldn't before. Maureen Dowd posited in the *New York Times*,

Funnily enough, Obama had to take a foreign trip (*to Ireland*) to seem less foreign to Americans. Even though he did a best-selling memoir about his roots, he has had a persistent and puzzling problem coming across as rooted. A surprising number of Americans still find the president exotic and existentially detached, falsely believing he's either a Muslim or foreign born...(Dowd 2011

[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/25/opinion/25dowd.html?ref=maureen dowd](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/25/opinion/25dowd.html?ref=maureen%20dowd)).

The visit to Ireland and claim to Irishness allowed Obama to present himself as an ordinary guy, like other White Irish ethnics in the US, who often had heretofore seen him as elitist - a class based rather than a racial judgment. It also gave him documentable ethnic and ancestral roots to Ireland. Irish Americans embraced the discovery of Obama's Irishness. After the discovery that Obama had Irish heritage it didn't take long for bumper stickers and t-shirts with:



Illustration 1

to appear.

The accomplishment of Whiteness in the US (Ignatiev 1995) allows Irish Americans to perhaps move beyond race and claim Barack Obama as Irish. The move to recognize and claim Irish heritage by Obama importantly moved him out of generic Whiteness or just being one of many African Americans who have White mothers, and gave him a country, a people and a place to point to and say 'I am from and of Ireland'. His resulting visit to Ireland and the acceptance of Obama as truly Irish, serves to underscore not just his own racial malleability but in fact the importance of his identity and

presidency in racial terms – he is a Black man who it also ethnically Irish. In effect he is making an ethnic claim without making a racial claim.² His flexibility is rooted in the power of Black racial identity and the persistence of the cultural one-drop rule. Because he has chosen Black as his racial identity, this perhaps gives him flexibility in US politics to take on Irishness as a lesser symbolic ethnic claim to identity. Obama does not say that he is White and he is Irish. He does not relinquish his Blackness. Instead he sidesteps a racial dilemma by claiming ethnic Irish identity but not a racial (White) one.

Obama's Reception in Ireland

Ireland is a country that until recently saw itself as relatively homogenous and decidedly White. It is now changing rapidly in terms of race/ethnicity, primarily through increased migration, and is struggling to understand how Irish people should deal with increasing racial/ethnic diversity in schools, public policy, government and politics. The presence, particularly of people of color, has challenged long held notions of Irishness being an accomplished sense of Whiteness and early indications are that there is an acceptance in Ireland that Irishness may be de-coupled, not from ancestry, as we see with Obama, but from skin color. For people in Ireland, it is Obama's cosmopolitan connections, of which being Black is a large part, as well as his Irish ancestry that matter. This means that Obama can claim both Irishness and Blackness unproblematically.

Obama clearly stated that Ireland is unique in that it 'punches above its weight' on the global stage. The visibility of its cultural contributions and its

² Thanks to Sean O'Riain for this valuable insight.

connections with not just Obama, but many past US presidents who continue to visit and feel connected to Ireland has paid off for Ireland in both financial and cultural ways (Wolf 2011). But the symbolic connection of Ireland to Obama and Obama's connection to Irishness more generally, pays off for both. For Obama, his visit and his now concrete ancestral connections to Ireland depend upon carefully managed and successfully translated notions of transnational Irishness that must be recognized and authenticated by Irish Americans in the US. People in Ireland are the key to that process and when they warmly welcomed and accepted Obama as a 'true son of Ireland.' In turn, Irish people get to claim the most politically powerful person in the world as one of their own thus making Irishness more cosmopolitan and multicultural. In addition, Ireland remains in the public eye, not only for its economic crisis, but also for its 'hard work ethic' identified by Obama in his speeches here and for access to political and economic power in the US. Obama gets from Irishness, through Irish ancestral connections, legitimate roots and perhaps success with the Irish American electorate.

In stereotypical Irish form, the discovery of Obama's Irish heritage in 2007 was solidified in cultural expression through a traditional Irish song. The Corrigan Brothers (with their band the Hardy Drew and the Nancy Boys), with later verses added by Shay Black, wrote a song in 2008 called 'There is No One as Irish as Barack Obama' which became an overnight you tube sensation with more than 1,000,000 hits. Unlike claims to Obama's blackness the song focuses primarily on his hitherto unknown Irishness. The claim that 'No One is as Irish as Barack Obama' is a part of the broader phenomena of Obama's flexible racialisation. It is also an example of how racial ideas can

travel and transnationally get translated in different cultural and national contexts.

But does Obama's Irishness mean the same thing in the US as in Ireland? It was much easier for Obama to be Irish in Ireland than perhaps it would be for him to claim such Irishness at home in the US due to Ireland's identification with a post colonial history and the identification of Irish people with oppression and solidarity with African Americans. It might also be because class differences and racism are more of an issue for him in Ireland than they are with Irish America. Ideas about race and interpretations of mixed race in the case of Obama and Irishness show how notions of Whiteness are transnational in construction and can be translated back to the US into political and ethnic capital.

When Obama finally landed in Ireland in 2011 on his first official state visit, it was overwhelmingly clear that Irish people were proud to welcome Obama as an Irish person. Ironically, it is the 'Irish who became White' (Ignatiev 1996) who openly recognized Obama, who publicly identifies as not White, but Black, as being both Black and now Irish. In doing so, Irish people in Ireland accepted and welcomed Barack Obama as Irish because he could prove his Irish ancestry by tracing a bloodline back to Ireland through his great, great, grandfather. It is the importance of verifiable blood ties that mattered and allowed him to claim Irishness.

Others who are also Black, who are born in Ireland, have lived their whole lives here and often speak Irish, cannot. The difference between the two is of course, that Obama can trace his bloodline/race and ancestry to Ireland through Whiteness and is in a position of power to assert his Irishness

and Black Nigerian children born in Ireland are not entitled, under new citizenship requirements (changed in 2004), to claim Irishness or Irish citizenship and are powerless become so. Obama's move to claim symbolic Irishness, and the corresponding acceptance of Barack Obama by the Irish populace as authentically Irish, prioritizes ancestry/bloodlines as the only means by which to be Irish. It reinforces the increasing two-tiered hierarchy of Irishness with 'certificates of Irishness' for those with Irish ancestry no matter how small, and nothing for those who aren't. In effect, it also airbrushes out Irishness and Irish history linked with Irish anti-abolitionists and slaveholders. Ironically, Michelle Obama also has Irish ancestry, which was carefully not mentioned during President Obama's visit to Ireland, because her Irish ancestor was a slave owner who had possibly illicit sexual relations with a Black enslaved woman (Geary 2011). Obama then accomplishes having Irishness through racially mixed ancestry while still maintaining Black identity. The importance of bloodline increases and the importance of Whiteness seems to decrease. This is a fascinating case where it appears that two key elements of phenotypical race are going in opposite directions. Blood and ancestry are becoming more important and skin colour is becoming less so.

When Obama traveled to Moneygall, County Offaly on 23 May 2011, he spent an inordinate amount of time shaking hands, handling crowd surfing babies, and hugging and kissing the 300 or so residents of this small Irish village where his great, great grandfather Falmouth Kearney had lived. He was greeted by, Henry Healey, his cousin eight times removed and other distant relatives and sipped a pint of Guinness in Ollie Hayes' pub, commenting that now he knows now that they keep all of the 'good stuff' in

Ireland. During the trip to Ireland news reporters continually commented that he was relaxed in a way not seen during his campaign. But the impact of the visit was not solely or even primarily concerned with the Irish audience. Instead, the world press was focused on a Black Irish man come home realizing that it was a public relations bonanza. *The Times* described it thus: "There are no American votes in Moneygall, but for Mr. Obama yesterday there was electoral gold to impress the most jaded campaign manager. There was riotous confirmation of his role as a product of the melting pot, and for a man that never really knew his father, there were roots." (24 March 2011 www.thetimes.co.uk).

Even Stephen Neill who discovered Obama's Irish heritage commented that he doesn't look Irish. "It's not the first thing you think is it, when you see him, and that's another thing that's taken people aback, makes you realize how related we all are," Neill says. (Lagorio, 2007). In the end, the popular notion that Barack Obama is not just the first African American President of the US, but ALSO Irish is gaining steam. His individual identification as Irish as well as Black and his interactions with people as such, we hope may trickle up into Irish state meanings of race, but for now Irish people for the most part seem happy to call them one of their own.

Conclusions

Obama can be Black and Irish to Irish people and Irish Americans precisely because he means different things to different people in racial terms. He embodies the racial expectations and understandings of heretofore different and separate racial groups. He can change his emphasis from Black

president to local Irish guy sipping a pint as it suits him and as the situation will allow. Some people would say that this is inauthentic or that Obama is using his situational ethnicity (Okamura 1981) in order to gain strategic ethnic advantage. The argument that he is accurately Black and is passing as White or that he isn't Black enough (Dickerson 2007) or that he is accurately mixed race (DaCosta 2008) or even that there is 'no one as Irish as Barack Obama' belie this understanding. He is accurately and **real**-ly all of these things at once. He is also culturally Hawaiian and ultimately cosmopolitan (as a Harvard educated elite) (Sugrue 2010). He is all of these and yet this does not make him dishonest in his representation of his racial self. He is like millions of other mixed race or multiracial people. He can have multiple identities and he can be strategically ethnic to further his political goals (as he joked he could have done in being Irish as a senator from Chicago).

Obama has 'cognitive flexibility' which is, "...the ability to tolerate and to manage increased levels of complexity and differentiation ...the flexibility of constructs, relational competence and adaptability are potentially the skills of living with difference and in the margins"(Kich 1996:275). This doesn't make Barack Obama a racial imposter, devious or inauthentic, but comfortable in multiple settings, with ambiguity and with people of all kinds, because he has fallen between social categories and developed the skill to do dwell in hybrid spaces. In turn, he projects this to others and they feel comfortable with him because he represents different things to them.

This is both Obama's strength and perhaps a potential weakness as a harbinger of a change in the meaning of race in the US. When Obama became president, people thought that racial change was complete and that

we had moved into a post racial society. This has allowed people to turn away from the differential effects of the recession on racial/ethnic groups in the US and hides much of the evidence to the contrary that race and particularly class still strongly divide the US nation. Second, many thought that the symbolic election of Obama could bring hope and social change because he was a racial bridge (being BOTH Black and White) to heal racial tensions in the US and yet, many also distrust him as not really Black or White and feel that he has betrayed one or both of his backgrounds in his political achievement. It is precisely because people can't pin down his true racial identity, that they feel he is not to be trusted. Finally, by arguing endlessly over whether Barack Obama is Black, but acceptable because he is well spoken and good looking, or whether he is Black enough, we miss the underlying ability of Obama to connect with people even though he is highly educated in elite institutions (Punaho and Harvard) through his connection to Irish people, his local village (and pub!) and the people of Moneygall.

Barack Obama's trip to Ireland and his move to accept and be accepted as Irish provided three important opportunities: access to 44 million Irish Americans who will be an important voting block in the upcoming 2012 election, a real and concrete ancestral connection to a culturally authentic White background (with an Irish language which Obama used in his speech - translating his campaign logo 'Yes, we can!' into 'Is Feidir Linn!'), and a chance to be seen as a man of the people, relaxed, chatting, and being embraced as a common working man of a small village in rural Ireland. Ultimately Obama also though provides an example of how race is changing in a global world where a Black man can be make claims to Irishness through

ancestry without relinquishing Black identity hence possibly taking two aspects of race (ancestry and skin colour) and de-coupling them in ways not seen before.

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Appendix:

Lyrics to 'There is No One As Irish as Barack Obama' – The Corrigan

Brothers (with Shay Black)

No one as Irish as Barack Obama
O'Leary, O'Reilly, O'Hare and O'Hara
There's no one as Irish as Barack O'Bama
You don't believe me, I hear you say
But Barack's as Irish, as was JFK
His granddaddy's daddy came from Moneygall
A small Irish village, well known to you all
Toor a loo, toor a loo, toor a loo, toor a lama
There's no one as Irish As Barack O'Bama

He's as Irish as bacon and cabbage and stew
He's Hawaiian he's Kenyan American too
He's in the White house, He took his chance
Now let's see Barack do Riverdance
Toor a loo, toor a loo, toor a loo, toor a lama
There's no one as Irish As Barack O'Bama

From Kerry and cork to old Donegal
Let's hear it for Barack from old Moneygall
From the lakes if Killarney to old Connemara
There's no one as Irish as Barack O'Bama
O'Leary, O'Reilly, O'Hare and O'Hara
There's no one as Irish as Barack O'Bama
From the old Blarney Stone to the great hill of Tara
There's no one as Irish as Barack O'Bama

2008 the White house is green, they're cheering in Mayo and in Skibereen.
The Irish in Kenya, and in Yokahama,
Are cheering for President Barack O'Bama
O'Leary, O'Reilly, O'Hare and O'Hara
There's no one as Irish as Barack O'Bama
The Hockey Moms gone, and so is McCain
They are cheering in Texas and in Borrisokane,
In Moneygall town, the greatest of drama,
for our Famous president Barack o Bama
Toor a loo, toor a loo, toor a loo, toor a lama

There's no one as Irish As Barack O'Bama

The great Stephen Neill, a great man of God,
He proved that Barack was from the Auld Sod
They came by bus and they came by car, to celebrate Barack in Ollie Hayes's
Bar
O'Leary, O'Reilly, O'Hare and O'Hara
There's no one as Irish as Barack O'Bama