

## **Ruby Wax: comedy, celebrity capital, and (re)presentations of mental illness.**

Representations of mental illness in the media has a long(ish) history and includes exploration across a range of genres including news and TV drama. Much of this has aimed at addressing stigmatization of mental illness as well as a critique of the anti-stigma approach. (see for e.g. Cross 2004, 2010; Harper 2005, 2009; Philo *et al* 1993; Philo 1996; Rose 2008; Signorelli 1989; Wilson 2012). In 2013, as a part of a larger project exploring sifting modes of representations of mental illness over time I interviewed a group of final year student nurses specialising in adult mental health in order to gain insight into their perceptions of how their patients were (re)presented across a range of media. During this interview they expressed concern about the growing numbers of celebrities who claimed to have experienced mental ill-health; rather than see this as a positive contribution to public understanding of mental illness, the nurses felt that this trend tended to glamorize and trivialize the actuality of suffering a mental disorder. Interestingly, however, they cited the comedienne and actor Ruby Wax as the one celebrity who countered this tendency. The nurses did not develop their reasoning, and I was unable to explore this in any depth at the time, but this detail has remained with me as particularly interesting, and it is this observation that has stimulated the research for this chapter.

Ruby Wax is an American-born, long-time British citizen who is known to UK audiences primarily for her comedy writing, stand-up routines, TV performances, and her series of interviews with prominent (often controversial) people. Wax is also very open about her bipolar disorder, and her bouts of deep depression. In relation to this she contributed to the BBC *Headroom* project that ran for two years (2008-2010) for which she made a series of webcasts called “Ruby’s Room” addressing a range of topics surrounding mental (ill) health. The webcasts comprised factual information together with interviews with individuals

experiencing the disorder under discussion; it was this *Headroom* series that the student nurses particularly drew attention to. Wax's migration from comedienne to mental health educator and campaigner has become increasingly pronounced since my interview with the nurses: in 2013 Wax gained a Master's degree in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy from Oxford University; she is a Visiting Professor in the School of Mental Health Nursing at the University of Surrey; in 2015 Wax was awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for her services to mental health; and in 2016 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the School of Psychology, University of East London. According to a BBC article announcing the OBE, 'Mark Williams, of clinical psychology at the University of Oxford, said, "Ruby's campaigning reveals her rare skill of being able to speak of the deepest and most painful things with openness, wisdom and humor, bringing acute observations and fresh perspectives to a field that badly needs them" (bbc.co.uk, April 2015). Wax's campaign style draws on, and is mediated through, her comedy persona while her mental health awareness promotion is presented through stand-up comedy routines as well as publications including *Sane New World* (2013) and *A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled* (2016).

This chapter explores Wax's TV celebrity persona to better understand how Wax disrupts the glamorizing discourse of celebrity-with-mental illness, specifically examining the relationship between Wax as comedienne and interviewer, as well as her migration to mental health campaigner. Drawing on Bakhtinian notions of carnival to argue that unruly, transgressive, and risky performances are markers of Wax's public identity and her celebrity persona I then draw on Driessens' (2013) definitions of celebrity capital and symbolic capital to consider Wax's migration from comedic performer and TV interviewer to prominent standard bearer for mental ill health sufferers and anti-stigma campaigner.

### **Carnival: unruly transgression and the grotesque**

Notions of the unruly are linked to Mikhail Bakhtin's (1968) concept of carnival and the grotesque. In popular (folk) culture carnival subverts institutions and challenges authority structures through inversion and mockery. As Kathleen Rowe points out, "Carnavalesque practices retain the critical and cultural tools of the dominant culture but in order to degrade and mock forms of high culture" (Rowe, 1995, p. 32). Carnival is transgressive. The grotesque—imagined in carnival as the pregnant grinning hag—symbolizes incompleteness, death and renewal, and change. Bakhtin formulates the grotesque as the "deeply positive" symbolic heart of carnival, the means through which terror of the cosmos, "the fear of that which is materially huge and cannot be overcome by force" (Bakhtin cited in Dentith, 1995, pp. 241-42) is shouted down through laughter. Bakhtin writes:

The downward thrust of bodily imagery in folk culture, which associates the procreative belly with the earth as womb, combats such [cosmic] fear. The body itself comes to represent the cosmos ... terror is mocked, transformed, and mastered. (cited in Dentith, 1995, p. 227)

Thus, the grotesque body and carnival spirit, freed from the restrictions of official life point to the possibilities of transcendence and the creation of new meanings.

The possibilities of renewal and change are inextricably linked to protection against terror through the transforming power of laughter. With particular reference to female comediennes Rowe states that "The unruly woman has cackled at the margins of Western history for centuries." Refusing to confine herself to her proper place the unruly woman "[t]hrough her body, her speech, and her laughter, especially in the public sphere [...] creates a disruptive spectacle of herself. The tropes of unruliness [...] are also a source of potential power" (Rowe, 1995, p. 31). Wax's comedy performance is marked by carnivalesque unruliness that transgresses normative codes of polite "feminine" behavior, and in the process offers new ways of seeing: refusing the trope of quiet, demure, and deferential femininity Wax is noisy, opinionated, and nosey. For example, conducting an interview with Grace Jones backstage in the ladies' toilets discussing appearance and wondering how Jones sees

her own face. This is permissible because in drawing attention to her (Wax's) own physical flaws – weight, bad makeup, lipstick on teeth – Wax draws an equivalence between her own messy, impolite, unfinished self with that of her interviewees. In doing so Wax is able to lift the lid of the surface image revealing more of the raw underbelly than is typically offered through formal presentation of self and other. (Specific examples will be discussed in more detail below.) Thus, her mode of comedy has the potential to subvert conventions of “official” culture—the polite, respectable dominant culture—to produce new ways of seeing or revealing unofficial “truths” through the transformative power of laughter.

### **Wax—unruly interviewer**

In a BBC2 edition of *Artsnight* (Barber, 2016) the journalist Lynn Barber refers to Wax's use of stand-up comedy in her mental health campaigning, but first introduces her by outlining her earlier career in comedy and her “[invention of] a whole new genre of TV interviews that shocked and delighted in equal measure.” Citing Wax as “the best TV interviewer ever,” Barber describes her as both disarming and astute saying that Wax is funny but “never at the expense of her interviewees.” This approach, Barber argues, resulted in interviewees “reveal[ing] themselves” (Barber, 2016). Barber's observation identifies characteristics that mark Wax's celebrity persona—funny, shocking—through which her interviewing technique developed. Because of this, I focus on her performance as interviewer to explore the construction of her comedic persona and to understand her migration from comedy celebrity to mental health campaigner.

The celebrity interview is a genre familiar to audiences, and Nunn and Biressi offer an analysis of their function in contemporary culture. They argue that one-to-one interviews are a vehicle through which celebrity intimacy is produced via culturally standardized mechanisms for “self-understanding: confession, introspection, and the representation of a

better or improved self' (Nunn and Biressi, 2010, p. 50)/ This "quasi-therapeutic encounter," they argue, is representative of the ways in which a culture of intimacy is embedded within media more generally and signals the ways in which celebrities (and other notable public figures) are expected to "be willing to engage in the business of emotional intimacy" (Nunn and Biressi, 2010, pp. 56-57). According to Nunn and Biressi, this is a mechanism through which celebrity as a viable commodity is maintained particularly in the wake of a media scandal that may lead to "disclosure of tragedy or dysfunction...[to thereby] explain the transgression." The revelation of the "authentic" or "truthful" self is traded for the continuing relationship between celebrity and his/her public. (Nunn and Biressi, 2010, p. 50) Thus scandalous transgression is smoothed out via the vehicle of confessional intimacy; the subject is redeemed and rehabilitated into public life.

However, while emotional intimacy does mark many of Wax's interviews, the means through which this is cultivated is less the therapeutic encounter based on confessions that reveal a truth requiring either punishment or absolution (Foucault 1978). Rather, the interviewee reveals themselves through Wax's risky, transgressive mode of performance that tends not to demand or expect confession or introspection, but nonetheless, as Barber states, results in her interviewees revealing themselves. This is best demonstrated with an exploration of one interview in the *Ruby Wax Meets...* series (BBC, 1996-98). style represented in this series and identified by Barber as a new genre of interview, connects our understanding as Wax as comedy performer to her transition to interviewer for the *Headroom* webcast series. The *Ruby Wax Meets...* series included interviews with often-controversial figures such as OJ Simpson, Donald Trump, and Sarah, Duchess of York, but the standout episode was her interview with the widowed disgraced former first lady of the Philippines and the then recently elected congresswoman of Leyte, Imelda Marcos. The interview was

first broadcast on BBC 1 in 1996 and cited by Wax as her favorite of the *Ruby Wax Meets...* series (Barber, 2016).

The interview takes place in Marcos' opulent Philippine apartment; as the camera pans across the living room a voice over explains that Marcos was "the First Lady of the Philippines for 20 years and became the richest and most infamous woman in the world." We cut to documentary images of riots and civil unrest as the narration describes her husband's "deeply corrupt presidency with reports of torture and abuse": the audience is positioned to interpret the present-day Marcos as continuous with her past—a grim context for an interview.

Before we meet the former First Lady we see Wax entering the apartment and addressing the camera introducing us to Marcos' "humble abode," her "luxury fall from grace abode." When Marcos appears in person, the interview proceeds but takes on the appearance of an informal conversation between two women as they wander around the apartment looking at various objects and photographs. Intimacy is developed through Wax's strategy of pausing to admire the numerous personal mementos—various decorative items and (the many) photographs of Marcos with past male leaders including Saddam Hussain, Colonel Gadaffi, Jimmy Carter, and Richard Nixon. Wax holds each object up to the camera for inspection while she also remains in shot; her direct-to-camera address not only invites viewers to look, but also makes them complicit in this rather personal gaze. Further intimacy is encouraged through references to Marcos' early life when she was called Meldi ("can I call you Meldi?") and by Wax's unruly, childlike enthusiasm for Marcos' home displayed by her (Wax's) desire to explore private areas such as the bathroom and bedroom. At one point she whispers "can I see your shoes? Please? It would make my life. I'm begging you." Marcos' well-known huge shoe collection continues to stand as a symbol of her reckless extravagance. For this Wax is rewarded: "I will show you my shoes." And indeed, by the end of the

program Wax takes viewers into the hallowed space that houses the collection and the camera pans across the rows and rows of designer shoes.

The light-hearted informal tone is maintained while the questions slide into more overtly politically sensitive areas. Wax asks Marcos, “Do you believe in abortion here?” to which Marcos replies, “No...we don’t believe in any termination of life.” Cut to documentary shots of massacred bodies; it is a bloodbath. With reference to Marcos’ frequent statements about the good her husband did as president, Wax says “they never gave you credit, for the good things you did. [knowing glance at the camera with mouth in tightly suppressed smirk] Why did he get so misunderstood?” The answer is a claim of cultural difference, that the West does not understand the East. In other words, it is all a misunderstanding. Here, the interviewee is not seeking absolution through confessional disclosure—absolution is not sought—but nonetheless reveals Marcos’ worldview. It is this mode of interviewing and “truth” revealing that Barber identifies. Further, the informal, intimate style of Wax’s questioning and her frequent direct-to-camera looks situates her as “one of us” while the cuts to documentary shots positions Marcos as “one of them” precluding the potential for sympathy for the interviewee.

The juxtaposition of politically centered questions with playful humor is an unruly performance that both reveals Marcos as subject and marks Wax’s comedy persona. The intimacy produced through her extended interview with Marcos is predicated on transgressive behavior that undercuts the formality usually expected of interviews with prominent personalities. The movement across Marcos’ apartment to include shots of her bedroom, bathroom and toilet, Wax’s quest to see the collection of designer shoes for which Marcos is infamous, and her request to call her Meldi are all transgressions that break through the carefully preserved official Marcos image. This is also risky as the potential to offend, and therefore alienate, is high; this mode of performance certainly offended Donald Trump who

was interviewed for the *Ruby Wax Meets...* series. Yet risk-taking also defines Wax's revelations of her own mental health difficulties and her experiences with depression about which she is candid.

Interestingly, Wax tells Barber that she uses comedy as a vehicle for getting her mental health messages across "because to do otherwise" she would "be 'whining'" (Barber, 2016). Whining is coded as feminine, a weak and unproductive form of speech; clearly not a suitable campaign style. Using Rowe's formulation of the grotesque in relation to women and comedy it is possible to recognize the kind of subversive power that Wax mobilizes; her comedy performance, as evidenced through the example of her meeting with Marcos, is one of transgression. The humor that underpins Wax's conversations with Marcos transgresses the usual polite official codes of the celebrity interview. The editing that includes cut away shots of piles of massacred and bloodied bodies juxtaposed with the claim that "we do not believe in the termination of life" reveals Marcos' disavowal of the atrocities that marked her husband's regime, while the "dirt" implied through the shots of the bathroom gesture towards the abject, the material that is a part of us but which disgusts us, that we seek to dispel: we are witnessing the contradictions and disavowals that mark Marcos' inner life world. So, notions of the grotesque help us understand the ways in which Wax uses humor to both engender trust in her subjects whilst simultaneously laughing down terror; her approach signals both a fascination with and disgust at the ways in which Marcos seeks to maintain her position of authority. However, there is more to Wax's performance than the grotesque, and it is the notion of risk-taking that further develops our understanding of her that relates to her later focus on mental illness.

To understand more about how Wax has gained trust and symbolic capital as a mental health campaigner we need to consider how unruly risk-taking operates. Mary Russo (1995) argues that performances of the grotesque are characterized by risky behavior and seen as a

form of “stunting.” Citing Amelia Earhart and her aerial acrobatics as an example, Russo identifies stunting as an activity that positions the stunters as exceptional or abnormal engendering an ambivalence that marks their performance (and the performers) as risky. While risk-takers attract disapproval, they also receive approbation and admiration from those witnessing the spectacle. As Russo argues, “in the everyday indicative world, [the presence of] women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces are always already transgressive” (Russo 1995, p56). Wax’s public performances are a form of stunting marked by risk; and in making a spectacle of herself and Marcos we occupy a liminal space which mediates between that which codifies official culture—the celebrity interview, and mainstream television with all of its rules and conventions—and the unruly, transgressive performance that enables the revealing of her interviewee - as exemplified in her meeting with Imelda Marcos discussed above. {Examples of Wax’s work}

### **Celebrity capital, symbolic capital.**

Driessens (2013) states that celebrity capital, “or broad recognizability,” is achieved through “accumulated media visibility that results from recurrent media representations” and which can “work across social fields” (Driessens, 2013, pp. 543-551). Further, celebrity capital is a form of power that allows for the ‘transfer [...] to another field from that in which [the celebrity] became famous converting their fame into another form of power’ (Driessens, 2013, p. 549). Celebrity is also a general term that can be applied to individuals who acquire media fame: “The celebrity embodies the empowerment of the people to shape the public sphere,” and it is an “encompassing term whereas concepts of the *hero*, *star*, *leader* are more specific categories of the public individual” (Marshall 1997, p.7, emphasis in original). However, if, as Marshall argues, celebrity status “confers on the person a certain discursive

power: within society, the celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channeled into media systems as being legitimately significant” (Marshall, 1997, p. x), then we can see how Wax’s celebrity capital gained through recurrent media exposure across a range of genres combines with the notion of a significant voice enabling her to move across social fields to become a mental health campaigner. It is through this process of migration that Wax transforms her celebrity capital into symbolic capital, a form of legitimization gained through public recognition from those with established power on the field. Celebrity capital and symbolic capital are distinct from one another, but in the case of Ruby Wax we can see how her celebrity status has transformed into, and overlaps with, symbolic capital through the awards and accolades cited at the beginning of this chapter. Driessens defines migration as part of the celebritization process “through which celebrities use both their relative autonomy as public personality and their celebrity status to develop other professional activities either within their original field or to penetrate other social fields. Migration is thus a twofold process that captures the mobility and convertibility of celebrity” (Driessens, 2012, p. 648). This formulation of celebrity capital’s transformation into symbolic capital helps us understand Wax’s migration from comedy performer to celebrated mental health campaigner. However, this migration is entangled with discourses of celebrity and has not been without its critics; this will be expanded on later in the chapter.

## **Migrant**

In the meantime, let us now return to the BBC *Headroom* campaign referred to by the student mental health nurses as an example of Wax’s non-glamorizing of mental illness. A BBC press release from 2008 describes the launch of *Headroom* as a “multi-pronged initiative” including “on-air programming, outdoor events and a fully interactive website featuring Ruby Wax” as a regular contributor. “The aim is to actively encourage people to

assess their mental wellbeing and take simple, practical steps to manage or improve it.” The release goes on to say:

Known to millions as the brash American comedienne, nearly four years ago Ruby Wax decided to take a break from show business and return to her originally (sic) calling—psychotherapy... In this new capacity, she will act as online advisor and agony aunt through the *Headroom* website, with a weekly webcast ... in which she will invite viewers to email their problems ... Ruby said “the thing about mental illness is that it still carries such stigma. We are ashamed to say we are ill since it’s all in our heads and you can’t see any wounds, scars or lumps... I know because I have depression ... I also know how frightening and isolating it is, so if you feel like a stranger to yourself, call into Ruby’s Room and you’ll find we’re all in it together”. (BBC, 2008)

The first webcast is titled “Depression” and, after a short title sequence, begins with Wax opening her front door in response to her doorbell being pressed; we hear her saying “yeah, yeah, yeah” before she acknowledges us by a direct address to camera waving us in and saying, “Hello, oh hi, come on in. This is Ruby’s house, and later we will go to Ruby’s room.” As we advance into the entrance hall the camera pans left to take in the (rather elegant) living room when she calls attention back to herself: walking backwards, inviting us to enter she says, “hello, hello, it’s part of the BBC series about mental health, and each week you email me and we talk about mental health issues and, you know, blah blah blah and that kind of stuff. But let me tell you, you are not alone. Many people suffer, especially me.” The camera follows Wax as she takes the stairs down to her kitchen where she will make us a cup of tea “in a second. But today we are talking about depression. It’s not a lightweight thing.” What follows are some brief facts including the numbers of suicides that occur as a result of depression, and that there is a terrible stigma around something that is not visible in the way that a physical illness is both visible and invites sympathies. She explains:

If I had a lump or a wound or a scar everyone would send me flowers and say “oh, I’m sorry” or you get cards. But this thing is in your mind. I mean it’s your thinking that’s punitive, negative assaulting kind of thoughts. Nothing shows. I mean, you don’t know where to go... This is mind numbing, paralysing agony. This is pain, so take it really seriously.

Once the kettle is on the boil we go back upstairs to the sitting room where Wax reads and responds to emails she has been sent before being introduced to her friend, Tina, who suffers from depression.

The direct and informal mode of address is underscored by references to a painting by her son and which prompts her to say she calls it “do you think I did something wrong as a mother?”—the camera pans to the large painting framed and mounted on the sitting room wall; it depicts a grey-colored human face presented against a black background; it has black orbs for eyes that are uneven in size and shape, a red mouth open and distorted—and to giving us our tea “which is probably burnt by now.” This is a style familiar to us and establishes continuity with herself as a celebrity interviewer. Wax maintains this informal tone as she chats with, rather than interviews, Tina about the latter’s experiences with depression. This conversation takes place in an extension of this domestic space with stuff of everyday life in view: a piano, a bicycle, bags, etc. The webcast ends with Wax once again walking us through her domestic space (the living room) and summarizing by explaining that even if “you” have not had a traumatic experience as the trigger—as is the case for Tina—but “you” cannot concentrate or sleep, “and there’s punitive thoughts in your head...here, I’ll open the door for you, then you’ve got depression. OK? Don’t be embarrassed about it, it happens. [Front door is opened, and the camera takes us outside to the street.] OK, keep those letters coming. See you next week.”

The celebrity capital acquired from years of media exposure through her comedy performances and her series of interviews allows for Wax’s migration to mental health spokesperson. During “Depression” we have glimpses of the humorous, self-deprecating presentation of self that Wax is known for, but interlaced with details of her own experiences

of depression.<sup>1</sup> This is risk-taking that stands as a challenge to dominant norms and discourses that shame those who experience mental illness in whatever form. It also certainly provokes an ambivalent response. In his review of her stand up show *Losing It* performed at the Menier Chocolate Factory in London, Michael Billington, a British theatre critic, displays some disdain when he concludes his review by asking “Is it a sign of progress that we now look to celebrities for validation of our suffering?” (Billington, 2011). He admires Wax’s candor, her openness about her ambition, her “narcissism and rage,” and he tells us that she is also “very funny about the hoity-toity English” (ibid), but is less convinced about her qualifications to address complex and serious issues regarding mental ill health. Wondering how the audience can relate to what she is telling them when Wax has the means to access expensive private health care while the majority of sufferers are dependent on the overstretched NHS for treatment he says that this is partly answered in the second half of the show. This is a Q and A with the audience who find her openness about a taboo subject beneficial, and when Wax “dropped her busy showbiz persona and addressed us simply as a human being” (ibid).

Nonetheless, his remark about our apparent reliance on celebrity calls to mind the disdain suggested by the student nurses’ observation, cited at the beginning of this chapter, about the trivializing effect of celebrity revelations of mental illness. According to Marshall (1995), the sign of celebrity is ambiguous; a symbol of individualism and success, celebrity is also “ridiculed and derided because it represents the center of false value.” Cleaved “from its use value,” celebrity is an articulation “of the individual as commodity” (Marshall, 1995, pp. x-xi). Billington’s ambivalence in relation to Wax’s qualification to help others with mental

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<sup>1</sup> In a 2012 programme for Channel 4 Wax reveals that she was receiving inpatient treatment in the Priory clinic while making her “Ruby’s Room” webcasts. She would leave hospital to do the webcast, returning once filming was done. This is a surprising revelation, and we can only guess why this was not revealed at the time or why filming continued at a time that must have been very difficult. It certainly was a risky endeavour but not one that created spectacle; this was a privately borne risk (*Ruby Wax’s Mad Confessions*, Channel 4, July 2012)

illness underscores the derision for celebrity described by Marshall. And yet, it is this same celebrity capital marked by unruliness and risk taking that enables the migration from comedy performer to mental health campaigner. Reviewing the same show, but this time at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Steven Brocklehurst (2011) displays less ambivalence towards the celebrity persona. “Ruby Wax is mentally ill, ‘but at least I got a show out of it’ she tells the audience with her trademark glibness.” The trademark glibness to which Brocklehurst refers is further evidenced with the inclusion of Wax’s explanation of her forthcoming website blackdogtribe.com which aims to build a mutual support network; she says: “One in four of us is nuts, we should be able to arrange something” (Wax as cited by Brocklehurst, 2011). In Brocklehurst’s account of *Losing It* we do not see questioning of the use value of celebrity, the center of false value indicated by Billington. Rather, he recounts Wax’s assertions that her study of mindfulness and cognitive-based therapy for her master’s degree enables an understanding of the way that the brain works that “takes away the fear. It’s like finding out you are not possessed by the devil.”

Unlike her interviews with celebrities, the *Headroom* webcast interviews are in the mode of intimate conversation: the interviewees are not subject to unruly risk-taking aiming at unmasking the public persona but are positioned as individuals who have experiences and insights that reveal the actuality of living with mental disorder. Certainly, commentators’ responses to the “Depression” webcast discussed above indicate appreciation and mutual recognition. Iluvjry1 writes, “You are so smart and funny and tell it like it is! I am so happy to have come upon your videos!” Meanwhile, richardm239 declares, “ruby you rock” and s b claims “you re (sic) an angel!” The webcasts evidently offer the potential of entering the intimate public sphere in which difficult life experiences are shared to “shout down” terror and incomprehension. The comments cited above suggest a connection and a shared

experience with the material presented in the webcast and illustrate a process best explained by Lauren Berlant:

...[w]hat makes the public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a world view and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience ... [an] intimate public sphere is a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general ... a place of recognition and reflection. (Berlant as cited in Nunn and Biressi, 2010, p. 59)

In addition to recognition and reflection, the webcast is a means through which the terror of the cosmos is shouted down.

### **Celebrity Culture and mental illness**

As Stephen Harper says, “mental illness narratives are common in celebrity culture” (2006, p. 312). The trope of mental illness as the source of creative genius is both longstanding and common ascribing a heroic triumph, a kind of individual exceptionalism that can be “turned to commercial advantage in a media culture in which celebrities must be rendered remarkable” (Harper, 2006, p. 316). Harper goes on to say that while mental illness is not exploited by artists:

as calculated bids for cultural cachet, [nonetheless] mental illness bears a promotionally and journalistically useful relation to definitions of artistic “credibility”. In this sense, mental illness fulfils a double function in contemporary culture: not only does it guarantee a celebrity’s “reality” as a suffering subject “just like us”; it also contributes to the perception of ... artistic authenticity. (ibid)

The commercialization of mental illness through celebrity culture echoes some of Nunn and Biressi’s arguments discussed earlier, and perhaps this made the student mental health nurses, cited at the beginning of this chapter skeptical about the proliferating connection of (usually bi-polar) mental disorder with celebrity<sup>2</sup> and the resulting glamorization. The tension between

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<sup>2</sup> What is interesting is the prevalence of bi-polar as the disorder suffered by celebrities; none that I am aware of declare other major, debilitating, illnesses such as schizophrenia. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider why this may be or why over the past couple of decades there has been a shift in media representations of mental illness depicted as bi-polar while during the 1960s and 1970s schizophrenia was more the commonly represented form.

ordinary and extraordinary as a mark of celebrity is not a new observation. Furthermore, as we have seen, celebrity is seen as a commodity grounded in the commercial imperatives of (popular) culture. However, what is foregrounded by Harper is the explicit commercialization of the celebrity persona whose struggles with mental illness may “increase a celebrity’s cultural power” (Harper, 2006, p. 316).

In the context of Harper’s arguments, we may see that Ruby Wax’s experiences of periods of mania and depression have contributed to the development of her celebrity persona which indeed mark her as a suffering subject who is “just like us.” It is also the case that her current symbolic capital is grounded in often-cited periods of mental ill health along with her frequently told autobiography—growing up in America, her “dysfunctional” family, her move to the UK, her acting career and stint with the Royal Shakespeare Company, her descents into depression. However, her celebrity persona is also predicated on a specific brand of comedy marked by an unruly disruption that challenges normative codes of feminine behavior—compliance, agreeability, passivity—a disruption that, for some at least, allows fear to be shouted down. To repeat Rowe: the unruly woman, “[t]hrough her body, her speech, and her laughter, especially in the public sphere [...] creates a disruptive spectacle of herself. The tropes of unruliness [...] are also a source of potential power” (Rowe, 1995, p. 31). It is this matrix of comic performances defined by unruly transgression, risk-taking, and revelations of mental illness that Wax has harnessed, enabling her to convert her celebrity capital to campaigner with symbolic capital.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that Ruby Wax’s migration across social fields, from comedienne and comedic interviewer to highly visible and celebrated mental health campaigner, has been facilitated by her particular brand of comedy and celebrity status. Her trademark unruly, impolite mode of presentation of self is maintained across the platforms through which she offers insight into

her own lived experiences of mental illness offering support to others facing similar struggles. As a celebrity she has maintained the discursive power to contribute to and shape the public sphere in terms of understanding that mental illness is ‘ordinary’, that it can and does affect any one of us. Her use of comedy prevents her, as she says, from appearing to ‘whine’ about being mentally ill; rather, her celebrity capital is based on a form of grotesque and risky performance through which to ‘shout down’ the terror of mental distress, to reveal it both visible and knowable, demystified and destigmatized.

Although not without her critics (for example, see Billington’s theatre review discussed above) Wax’s show *Losing It* and her *Headroom* webcasts, along with the maintenance of her comedy celebrity persona, illustrate her mode of performance through which she offers emotional knowledge and a shared world view enabling her voice to be seen (by many at least) as legitimately significant; this is what has allowed the attainment of social capital as celebrated mental health campaigner. In offering narratives of her own descent into deep depression delivered through a performance that is transgressive and risky (a form of stunting) Wax is mobilizing the ‘deeply positive’ grotesque body freed from the restrictions of official life. Her performances thereby gets under the skin in order to reveal what it is beneath, to reveal what it is to suffer mental illness. This is the carnival spirit that, free from the restrictions of official discourse, shouts down terror through laughter and is suggestive of new meanings.

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