

“Voice of Resistance”: Rim Banna, Cancer and Palestine’s Body Politic<sup>1</sup>

*Will I see you in your eminence?  
Reaching to the stars, reaching to the stars  
My homeland, My Homeland* (unofficial National Anthem of  
Palestine)

On 24 March 2018, the Palestinian singer and composer Rim al-Banna died after a nine-year battle with cancer. Her death was no private or ordinary one, however, because Banna was a cultural icon both in her native Palestine and across the Arab world. As thousands of men and women gathered at her funeral in her birthplace of Nazareth, they chanted the unofficial Palestinian national anthem, “Mawtini [My Homeland],”<sup>2</sup> written by the Palestinian poet Ibrahim Tuqan.

To be sure, Banna was by no means the first or last Palestinian citizen or civilian whose death became an occasion of national mourning. However, what is remarkable in her case was that her specific cause of death – cancer – itself became retrospectively nationalized and politicized. In many ways, Banna’s own terminally ill body became intimately and retroactively linked with the Palestinian body politic.

This essay offers a cultural anatomy of Banna’s post-illness body, from her cancer diagnosis, through her death, and into the commemorations that ensued. To summarize my argument, I draw on Banna’s music, her interviews, as well as the public obituaries in the wake of her death, to argue that her cancer (and other chronic health issues) have not only been transformed into an allegory or metaphor for the colonial situation of Palestine but into the site for a poetics of Palestinian unity and resistance. In conclusion, the essay observes how the posthumous release of Banna’s last album is the culmination of this becoming-political of cancer.

## **The Metaphorization of Cancer:**

In Herzlich and Pierret's *Illness and Self in Society*, they see cancer as a genuinely global metaphor that proliferates – one is almost tempted to say ‘metastasizes’ – across the planet. This globalization, they note, has been strongly felt since at least the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, Susan Sontag was arguably the first critic to examine the many ways in which illness – tuberculosis, cancer and Aids – have been metaphorized and politicized throughout history. For Sontag, however, cancer stands out as the disease par excellence that has been “encumbered by the trappings of metaphor.” In her analysis, what distinguishes cancer metaphors from other illness metaphors is their starkly military dimension: cancer metaphors are “drawn not from economics but from the language of warfare; every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology.”<sup>4</sup>

To speak of cancer, thus, is increasingly to speak of a violent, even “evil” disease, of cells that invade and “colonize” the body, and of treatments that are “chemical warfare, using poisons.” The militarization of cancer metaphors, continues Sontag, has been most notably registered and transmitted in political discourse, across various historical epochs and settings. For Trotsky, Stalinism was “the cancer that must be burned down,” whereas the Gang of Four were the “cancer of China” and John Dean described the Watergate scandal to Richard Nixon as “a cancer within – close to the Presidency – that’s growing.” In response to the Vietnam War, Sontag herself trafficked in the same military metaphor: “the white race is the cancer of human history.”<sup>5</sup>

If the militarization of cancer has a long and ignoble history, it is perhaps most acutely played out today in the Arab-Israeli conflict where political parties, politicians, and media on both sides of the conflict repeatedly draw on cancer metaphors to speak of and against each other. To begin with the Israeli side, General Effi Eitam, a former IDF brigadier and ex-leader of the National Religious Party, has often referred to the Arab settlements in

Israel and the occupied territories as a “cancerous tumour destroying the ordered host” of Israel’s body politic. This metaphor was deployed in the context what has been called “a strategy of urbicide by bulldozer,” i.e. destroying and bulldozing Palestinians people’s homes to gain military control.<sup>6</sup> In the same way, Ilan Pappé notes that an Israeli government report, submitted to Israeli Prime Minister Rabin, contains a description of the Arab population of Galilee as a “cancer in the Jewish body that had to be curbed and contained,”<sup>7</sup> whereas the right-wing Israeli website *Masada2000*<sup>8</sup> calls Israel’s Arab citizens a “cancer that has been left to fester much too long already.”<sup>9</sup>

For Arab politicians, journalists and authors, by the same token, Israel, and Zionism more generally, have also been described in biopolitical terms as a cancer or tumor that cannot be cured.<sup>10</sup> The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has even been portrayed as a cancer that is in the process of “metastasising” into other conflicts that will destroy the whole region. In the words of Bichara Khader, founder and chairman of EuroMeSCo (the Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission): “It is [...] in the interests of all those living on the shores of the Mediterranean to remove the cancer caused by the Arab-Israeli conflict before it degenerates into a further war the consequences of which would affect Europeans, Arabs and Israelis alike.”<sup>11</sup>

What do we talk about politically, then, when we talk about cancer? To recall Sontag’s classic analysis, cancer as a metaphor is not “morally permissible”<sup>12</sup> thus, we must surgically remove this metaphorical ‘cancer’ within cancer itself. Yet, as Arnold Weinstein argues, “illness cannot, *pace* Sontag, be cleanly separated from its metaphor, desirable as that might be, and that is because illness is so often social, so that one person’s infirmity seems pregnant with meaning for another.”<sup>13</sup> For Weinstein, we cannot simply ‘cure’ cancer of its metaphors:

[F]rom a literary or even a social perspective it is wiser to acknowledge that such metaphors have proven irresistible to societies under stress. They are able to catalyze mass social responses that become nightmarishly purgative for the state, a kind of macrocosmic mockery of the desired “cleansing” effect that Aristotle designated by the notion, *catharsis*.<sup>14</sup>

If illness is inherently social, then illness – and more particularly cancer – metaphors necessarily perform social and political work whether it be redemptive or purgative, recuperative, or violently exclusive. In turning to the case of Rim Banna, we will now see how the will to metaphorize her cancer proves equally irresistible even or especially when the political implications remain divisive or violent.

### **Rim Banna:**

In many ways, Rim Banna’s work as a singer, songwriter, composer, and activist was always deeply enmeshed in Palestinian history, culture, and folklore. Born in 1966 to a Christian family in Nazareth, Banna initially came to prominence in Palestine during the first *intifada* of 1987. To offer a brief overview of her career, she released her first two albums of live performances - *Jaffra* [Jaffa] (1985) and *Dumu ‘ik ya Umi* [Your Tears, Mother] (1986)<sup>15</sup> – while receiving her formal music education in Russia. In 1991, following her graduation from the Russian High Institute, she returned to Nazareth with her Ukrainian husband, the musician Leonid Alexeienko (with whom she has three children) and devoted her career to music.<sup>16</sup>

To a certain extent, Banna’s subsequent career (she has released some 12 albums) – which was marked by a series of awards and accolades – could be described as an attempt to create and preserve the fragile ‘archive’ of Palestinian folklore and poetry through her music.<sup>17</sup> She produced a number of albums that revived traditional, and increasingly

forgotten, Palestinian children's songs and hymns. In her album *al-Hilm* [The Dream, 1993],<sup>18</sup> for example, she preserved an entire repertoire of traditional Palestinian children's songs for a new generation of children who have, in turn, grown up listening to them.

It is also worth noting that, as well as composing her own original lyrics, Banna incorporated and adapted the work of key national Palestinian poets such as Mahmoud Darwish, Sameeh al-Qasem and Tuqan into her lyrics. She also repeatedly drew on the poems of her mother, the poet Zuhaira Sabbagh. To put it in her mother's own words, Banna's songs are a fusion of "popular ballad and traditional themes" with "modern music," often interspersed with some colloquialism.<sup>19</sup> For Martina Sabra, Banna's songs are at once "haunting, emotional, at times bordering on kitsch."<sup>20</sup> In the judgement of Suheil Khoury – general director of the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music at Birzeit University – Banna's work combines both a highly personal and singular mode of composition with a deep immersion in the Arabic musical tradition: "Rim's voice does not resemble traditional Arab voices. It is powerful and strange in a way that touches the listener, even if he does not understand Arabic. Her songs had a national and humanitarian character."<sup>21</sup>

To focus more precisely on her body of work, Banna's music repeatedly tells the stories of the suffering of displaced Palestinians, of life under the occupation, and of the pain of the loss of the homeland.<sup>22</sup> Her song "Sarah," from the album *Maraya al-Ruh* [The Mirrors of my Soul, 2005], is dedicated to the memory of all the children killed by the occupation:

Sarah  
My Sarah  
Was taking her first faltering steps  
On the land of Palestine  
Her joyful laugh was smothering  
The sky of Palestine  
She was found unaware by a sniper  
With one shot to her forehead  
To the small head of Sarah  
Sarah  
My Sarah  
Take off the bandage from Sarah's eyes

And let her see  
The face of her murderer  
Sarah.<sup>23</sup>

By the same token, “Fares ‘Awdeh” [Fares Odeh] – another song from the same album – pays tribute to a youth killed while throwing stones at the IDF forces who invaded Gaza at the beginning of the second *intifada* in 2015:

Butterflies will carry you to the surface of a cloud  
A gazelle will plant you in the roots of a sycamore  
The odour of bread and milk will take you  
As a martyr to your mother’s lap.<sup>24</sup>

If Banna’s work focuses on the lives and deaths of individual Palestinians, it also addresses Palestinian cities in songs like “Teeri U Hadi Ya Wazi [Fly and Slow Down Goose]”<sup>25</sup> and the plight of displaced Palestinian mothers in “Ya Leil Ma Atwalak” [This Never Ending Night].<sup>26</sup> This interweaving of nationalist narratives with narratives of motherhood is, in fact, a consistent theme of her work: In Banna’s music, we find an affectively charged relationship to the mother figure which is ultimately an expression of the love of the “motherland”, Palestine.<sup>27</sup>

However, Banna’s music not only celebrates Palestinian cultural and national identity, but specifically criticizes and contests Zionism. Dressing in traditional Palestine attire and jewelry during her performances, she has been described as operating “outside of the Zionist cultural mainstream, refusing to be co-opted and instead finding popularity among the masses dedicated to the cause of liberation.”<sup>28</sup> She was one of the first Palestine artists to call for a cultural boycott of Israel and regularly performed in refugee and volunteer camps.<sup>29</sup> Appropriately, her work thus seeks to speak directly back to the very groups whose stories she captures in her songs: “I am an artist that uses her voice against the unjust and the occupier and I present songs from reality to address the people with freedom.”<sup>30</sup> During the early days of the *intifada* of 2000, Banna performed concerts outdoors even as helicopters

bombarded the Occupied Territories from above. For Banna, such performances were an act of solidarity with the Palestinian people: “We just wanted to feel that life was going on [...] to stay in contact with the people, not to leave them in the difficult times of tragedy and siege.” In an interview reflecting on her musical career between her return to Nazareth in 1991 and the *intifada* of 2000, Banna observed to *Haaretz* newspaper that “the atmosphere has changed, and I feel more like a fighter than a musician”:

[...] Suddenly people were falling victim, and tanks began to shoot, and bombardments, and blood. I couldn't understand - are we really here, or maybe in Afghanistan? As a Palestinian woman, I had to do something concrete, to help my people, to come myself and support them - and I knew that I had to travel and perform in cities in the West Bank despite the difficulty and the danger, that I mustn't stop, and that despite the roadblocks and the soldiers, the music would continue to be heard. In this way music became my weapon; unfortunately, I need to use military images like “fighter” and “weapon,” but isn't this what we are seeing around us all the time?”<sup>31</sup>

Even more, Banna's increasingly international political profile was cemented by her participation in the album *Lullabies from the Axis of Evil* in 2004. Conceived by Norwegian producer Erik Hillestad, this album featured various female artists from the countries and nations that were dubbed members of the “Axis of Evil” by American President George W. Bush in his State of the Union Address of 2002. To speak against this political stigmatization, Banna and the other contributing artists sang traditional lullabies and hymns to promote their musical culture to the Western world. Following her contribution to this album, Banna went on to release her internationally acclaimed album *Maraya al-Ruh* [The Mirrors of my Soul] in 2005, which was dedicated to both Palestinian and Israeli prisoners. The following album *Lam Takun Tilka Hikayati* [This Was Not My Story] (2006)<sup>32</sup> also featured on European charts and was regarded as one of the year's “most popular world music releases.”<sup>33</sup> In a contemporary interview, Banna again underscored the extent to which she was seeking to communicate her politics to a wider global audience: “I'm fighting through the music and

trying to leave a big influence in the heart of the European audience, to move something in their minds and feelings.”<sup>34</sup>

If Banna was originally regarded as the “voice of Palestine,” her music and songs – with their emphasis on freedom and revolution – inevitably spoke to people across the Arab world as well, particularly following the “Arab Spring.” It is significant that the popularity of her songs on social media and at demonstrations only increased with the succession of uprisings that began in 2011. During the Egyptian uprisings, for example, her music was regularly played in Tahrir Square (where demonstrators gathered to oppose the autocratic regime of President Hosni Mubarak) and its defining calls for freedom and justice made some Arab governments notably wary of her. In another interview, Banna noted that she never received an invitation to perform in any Gulf state or an official invitation from Egypt, perhaps – as she puts it – because “of my activities and my support [of] freedoms and Arab revolutions.”<sup>35</sup>

In short, Banna’s music is rooted in, and gives voice, to the colonial history of her native homeland and, as such, is regarded as a prime recapitulation of an aesthetics of protest and resistance. This facet of her work, as we will see, takes a more intensely affective charge following her breast cancer diagnosis in 2006.

### **Politicizing Cancer:**

In her obituary “Remembering Rim Banna,” Jordanian journalist and activist Rana Hussein writes of Banna’s extraordinary resolution upon learning of her cancer diagnosis: “It is as if her life restarted after learning of her illness. She used the nine years of her life to sing and empower others [...].”<sup>36</sup> To a remarkable degree, Banna saw her struggle against cancer as a continuation of her prior political struggles: “I am resisting two cancers: the occupation and the one inside my body.”<sup>37</sup> She repeats in another interview: “Cancer invaded my body just



as the occupation invaded our land.”<sup>38</sup> Banna’s tendency to read her medical experience in metaphorical terms as a political battle can, of course, be seen in the long context of Arab militarizations of cancer. Yet it is also possible to see many more complex factors at play in her particular association with cancer and the Israeli occupation. What then is Banna speaking about when she speaks about cancer?

To be sure, Anne Hunasker Hawkins, in her wide-ranging study on pathographies, pinpoints a number of “metaphorical paradigms” which appear in autobiographical accounts of illness, treatment, and even death. She argues that these metaphorical paradigms often repeat “themes of an archetypal and mythic nature,” but these themes are also “culturally inflected” and “shaped by a particular place and time.” For Hawkins, the “battle myth” stands out as one of the dominant mythic paradigms employed both by patients and doctors alike.<sup>39</sup> In this context, Banna’s own description of her illness can also be seen to deploy a particularly Arab variation upon Hawkins’ battle myth.

It is remarkable how Banna consistently articulated her experience of cancer, from the moment of diagnosis onwards, as directly analogous to the Israeli occupation: “The occupation took Palestine from us by force and cancer occupied my body against my will,” she says.<sup>40</sup> Appearing on BBC Arabic in 2015, she even drew a link between her cancer diagnosis and her work as a political and cultural activist. To put it in her words: “I am an activist. I visit refugee camps, I speak of freedom and justice. I work for the liberation of my people. Is that why I got cancer?”<sup>41</sup> If a classic Arab cultural conception of cancer sees it as a form of ‘divine punishment’ for alleged acts of moral transgression, Banna here conceives of her own diagnosis as a kind of political punishment or injury incurred because of her political activism. In response to Banna’s question, another guest on the program revealingly declared that “cancer is not a punishment.”<sup>42</sup>

In the same way, Banna's militarization of her own cancer also speaks back against what we have seen to be Sontag's claim that such military metaphors "contribute to the stigmatizing of certain illnesses and, by extension, of those who are ill."<sup>43</sup> To speak of her body as being occupied or invaded by cancer, Banna is less accepting a personal stigma than situating her body as the metaphorical site of, as we will now see, the ongoing 'resistance' against occupation whether medical or military. In this sense, Banna militarizes not only her cancer but her resistance against it and this biopolitical subject position empowers both the artist herself and her wider Palestinian and Arab fan base.

a. Naming "That Disease"

In order to understand Banna's biopolitical 'resistance,' it should be stressed that cancer still has a largely taboo status in the Arab world. It is usually referred to using different aphorisms such as "*Heydek al-Marad* [that disease]," "*al-Marad Yalli Mabyitsama*, [the disease that cannot be named]," and "*al-Marad al-'Atel* [the bad disease]," amongst others.<sup>44</sup> As documented,<sup>45</sup> this cultural tendency to avoid naming cancer also contains a gendered dimension. If the extent of the taboo of cancer varies from one Arab country to another, it remains the case that women – more than men – are affected most by the social stigma that is perpetrated following a cancer diagnosis. For Arab women, a cancer diagnosis is often seen as significantly minimizing marriage prospects, the likelihood of reproduction, and the ability to maintain, or perform, a 'feminine' identity.<sup>46</sup> In this context, Arab women often feel compelled to hide their cancer diagnosis and treatment even from close family members and friends.

To resist this culture of silence and non-disclosure, Banna was – from the start – vocal about her cancer experience. She immediately appeared in public and on various media platforms to speak about her illness. Her Facebook account regularly featured images of

herself with shaven hair both in hospital (with tubes attached to her body) and at home in bed. Accompanying these images, she gave short and, at times, poetic descriptions of her condition. For Banna, this social media presence seemed to have been part of a conscious public relations or media campaign: she also spoke candidly and transparently about her condition in her interviews, highlighting the psychological trauma she experienced upon diagnosis, and documenting her subsequent battle against the disease. In one interview, she even described how she sat with her children to show them her mastectomy scars in an attempt to help them come to terms with the changes to her body.<sup>47</sup>

For Banna – who also continued to produce albums and to perform for the public when her health permitted – this campaign recalls what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called “visual activism,” insofar as she positioned herself in the “public eye, saying ‘look at me’ instead of don’t stare”.<sup>48</sup> Her gender gave this visual activism a particular resonance because it was unprecedented for an Arab woman at the time – especially a celebrity – to be so open about her cancer experience. As Banna herself asserted: “From the start [of my diagnosis], I walked amongst and with the people on the streets.”<sup>49</sup> If her cancer activism was, in one sense, utterly singular – she became one of the founding members of Mariam Foundation, the first Arab cancer foundation in her country – there was another sense in which it continued, and even coalesced with, her earlier activism. In October 2013, for example, Banna held a free performance at the site of the Basilica of Jesus the Adolescent (or, as it is more widely known, the Salesian Church in Nazareth) for the occasion of October Breast Cancer month and her participation in this event was layered with personal and political meaning.

In an explicit sense, of course, the event was intended to raise awareness of breast cancer – the Church was even illuminated pink for the occasion – but, revealingly, the actual site of the performance also contained a political charge. To begin with, the Salesian Church

is a notable religious, historical, and archaeological site in Nazareth. Perched on top of a hill called “Mount of the Start,” the Church offers a panoramic view of the old part of the city and holds a particular significance for Palestinians in that it is one of the sites that affirms and reinforces their connection to the land. In singings songs of freedom and resistance in this simultaneously ancient and modern context, Banna inevitably also allied her fight against cancer, on the one hand, and the Palestinian resistance against the occupation, on the other, allowing the artist to find a social and political valence in her illness.

#### b. Resisting Cancer

In TV interviews, Banna herself constantly drew comparisons between political and medical resistance to an occupying power whether it be cancer or the Israeli occupation: “One of the ways in which I strengthened my will to cope with cancer is by thinking of the occupation and our live amidst it,” adding that when she first learned of her diagnosis she thought to herself: “Let me deal with it the way I deal with the occupation. The occupation took Palestine from us by force and cancer occupied my body against my will. My fight and resistance against cancer was for me very similar to my fight and resistance against the occupation.”<sup>50</sup> To be sure, what we might call Banna’s ‘double resistance’ seems to serve two functions which are, appropriately enough, both personal and political. On the one hand, she is able to personalize her politics by confronting her medical condition with the same measure of dignity, strength, and bravery that has been a marker of her political activities. On the other hand, she is able to politicize the personal by connecting her medical experience of ‘suffering’ to the suffering of her people. In the process, Banna’s illness is transformed into what Hawkins calls a “mythos of heroism” which is characterized not only by a “refusal to be victimized” but a cultural politics of resistance.<sup>51</sup>

It is particularly significant that Banna's politicization of her illness also shifts as her cancer returned following a period of remission. As a consequence, she stopped speaking about her body's capacity to fight cancer (and by proxy the occupation) and began to transform her body into the site of political sacrifice for the lost nation: "Burn my body after my death ... and fill my ashes in a Nazarene bottle of araq<sup>52</sup> and stuff it [the bottle] with gas and flaming material so it turns into a Molotov [Molotov cocktail] in the hands of a resistance fighter to stone the enemies of love and tyrants of the earth" (@rimbannaofficial, July 3, 2013). In her insistence on imagining her own corpse as the site through which revolutionary action can be instigated, Banna transforms herself from a revolutionary hero into a political martyr.

By figuring her body and even her corpse as that of a Palestinian resistance fighter in this way, Banna creates what Banu Bargu (in her discussion of hunger strikes in Turkey) calls the weaponization of life and even death: the "politics of the weaponization of life operates as a dialectic between the militant and the martyr, the human and the weapon, the living and the dead, steered by the "consciousness of sacrifice.""<sup>53</sup> If, as Bargu argues, death itself can become a kind of political site or subject position for resistance, then it becomes possible to speak of something called "necroresistance": "An emerging repertoire of action that is based on the appropriation of the power of life and death into the hands of those who resist." For Bargu, necroresistance precisely consists in "'its negation of life through the technique of self-destruction transforming death into a "counter-conduct"'<sup>54</sup> and encompasses a whole set of practices such as "amputation, maiming, infection with disease, sewing of eyes and mouth, [and] temporary starvation...to the more fatal actions of self-immolation (understood as setting oneself on fire), temporally indefinite hunger strikes, fasts unto death, self-killing...and forms of suicide attack."<sup>55</sup> In Banna's wish or will to render even her corpse a

Molotov cocktail to be used for resistance, we find a further extension of this necropolitical logic: the dead body becomes both imaginatively and literally a ‘weapon.’

Banna, literally and symbolically, recruits her cancer and her possible death from it into an account of her transformation into a *fida'i* (‘freedom fighter’) who is willing to sacrifice his/her life for the land and the nation. Her death, as such, is envisioned and rendered an ultimate act of self-sacrifice and Banna herself a martyr of Palestine. In her imagining of her own death and the subsequent care of her corpse, Banna also renders the militant fighter’s body a proxy or surrogate through which she can continue to carry out revolutionary and martyrdom operations.

c. Silence as resistance

If anything, Banna’s medico-political resistance was further enhanced by her reaction to another chronic health condition that she endured in the remaining years of life: she developed a throat infection in 2015 which led to the loss of her voice and, subsequently, her ability to sing.<sup>56</sup> If various media platforms linked the loss of her voice to her cancer, Banna would later appear on Palestinian 48 TV to stress (with a hoarse and barely audible voice) that the two conditions were not related. In the same way as we have seen with her cancer diagnosis, Banna nevertheless went on to politicize her ‘silencing.’

To focus on her interview on Palestinian 48 TV, for example, Banna described the gruelling series of medical examinations she has undergone to determine the cause of her voice loss and specifically mentions that she was first treated by an Israeli doctor whom “did not help!” She then went on to contrast the Israeli physician’s “unhelpfulness” with her current Palestinian doctor who was finally “helping her.”<sup>57</sup> Again, we see that Banna frames the relationship between Palestinian patient and Israeli doctor in terms of the relationship between colonizer and colonized in a manner that recalls Franz Fanon’s seminal discussion of

“Medicine and Colonialism.”<sup>58</sup> For Banna, her struggle to regain her voice is symbolically rendered a struggle for agency and autonomy in the face of the occupation and, consequently, the “unhelpfulness” of her first doctor becomes yet another colonial attempt to silence her rather than heal her. In the same interview, Banna again weaponized her voice in political terms: “I felt that my only weapon was gone.”<sup>59</sup>

If Banna consistently deployed military and more particularly colonial metaphors when speaking about her illness, it is striking that the wider Palestinian and Arab media also participated in, and reinforced, this politicization of cancer to the point where her public persona became entirely identified with it. To take just one example, the Lebanese poet and journalist Zahi Wehbe began a two-hour interview with Banna by declaring that “she resists two malignant diseases: cancer and the occupation” of Palestine,” and acclaiming her as the artist whose “voice is in the service of the plight of her people.”<sup>60</sup> In a commentary published on his twitter account after her death, Wehbe further eulogized Banna: “the singer of Palestine was in the hearts and throats of the resistance fighters” (@Zahiwehbe, March 24, 2018).

Perhaps the most powerful symptom of how Banna’s bodily illness became intricately tied to the Palestinian body politic were found in the funeral rites, communal gatherings, songs, and chants performed on the day of her burial. Her open casket was wrapped in the Palestinian flag, while the dead artist herself was dressed in traditional Palestinian attire with a *kufiya* wrapped around her neck and flowers adorning her body. As Banna’s corpse was paraded through the streets of Nazareth and crowds of Palestinians followed the procession chanting the unofficial Palestinian anthem, it became clear that her death offered an opportunity to reinforce a poetics of political collectivity and resistance amongst Palestinians at large. For British-Palestinian Professor and writer Kamel Hawwash, whose obituary was published in *The Arab Weekly*, Banna became a kind of secular political saint or martyr: “I

bet Rim Banna is looking down on us with her beaming smile, happy that, even in death, she strengthened the bond between Palestinians and their homeland [...] Farewell, Rim Banna. [...] we promise you that the young will not forget Palestine and your music will outlast us all to provide them and generations after that, if need be, inspiration to carry on the fight for freedom, justice and equality.”<sup>61</sup> The Palestinian Ministry of Culture, on the other hand, issued a formal statement: “Rim is an inspirational icon for the struggle against occupation. She always carried [the image of] Palestine in her voice,” (@pculturem, 24 March, 2018).<sup>62</sup>

Coupled with all this were drawings, paintings, and photographs of her on social media that depicted her in conjunction with and against the backdrop of Palestinian national and political symbols. In one drawing, for example, we see Banna’s face with the Palestinian *kufiya* around her neck. The *kufiya*, in turn, extends behind head giving way to the outline of a map that features Palestinian homes and alleys. In another image, we see a collage that includes a close-up image of Banna’s face alongside images of the Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat in his youth and of people demonstrating while holding the Palestinian flag. Inscribed on the poster are the date of Banna’s death and the words: “the white gazelle, Rim, has departed ...” Accompanying this image is a Facebook entry: “the martyr is beloved by God, O the beloved of our heart. Palestine will bid you farewell and God, his angles and messengers will welcome you in heaven” (@LoversRimBanna, March 24, 2018).

In this context, Banna’s death is celebrated as the death of a hero and a political martyr rather than the death of a woman from cancer. She is also given the same national tributes and accolades that are often showered on *fida’iyeens* (‘freedom fighters’) upon their death. If Banna’s cancer was rendered the political enemy in her life, then her death at the hands of this enemy is imagined – by her wide Palestinian and Arab fan-base – as an attempt to give life to her people. Writing on social media, Banna’s family announce the artist’s death



by declaring: “She [Banna] passed with a completion of her national duties towards her Palestinian people and all the people facing injustices” (#Rim\_Banna, March 24, 2018).

### **Posthumous Album:**

Drawing this paper to a close, Banna’s death was transformed into an occasion for reviving a poetics of resistance amongst Palestinians, but arguably it is in the artist’s last album – released a month after her death – that the intersection between the personal and the political reaches its apex. Entitled *Sawt al-Muqawama* [Voice of Resistance], the album was produced in collaboration with one of Norway’s largest record labels Kirkelig Kulturverksted (KKV)– Crossing Borders.<sup>63</sup> The Norwegian company released Banna’s album in April 2018 and the release coincided with the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the *Nakba* (the exodus of 1948). The 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary itself saw thousands of Palestinians participating in the ‘Great Return March’ protests.

Banna’s posthumous album – which runs for an hour and is composed of 15 songs – resonates with the artist’s long-standing commitment to the plight of her people at the same time as it underscores her own personal struggle with illness. To be sure, Banna rarely sings but instead reads her own poetry that draws on her own personal pain. These recitals are, in turn, juxtaposed with the sounds of her various medical scans – in particular scans of her heart, brain, and throat – which had been transformed, through software, into music. Together with this are the electronic beats of Checkpoint 303, an “activist sound art project’ led by sound designer SC Mo Cha,<sup>64</sup> and piano improvisations of Norwegian jazz musician and pianist Bugge Wesseltoft.<sup>65</sup>

The album thus becomes a kind of sound collage which, once again, weaves together her personal and political histories. It is in her song “La Ubali [I Don’t Care]” that this interweaving is most acutely expressed: “I am trying to fight against the sickness of the cells

like I am fighting against occupation.” At a later point she adds: “the cancer is sick with Rim, with me, he has a sickness, not the opposite.”<sup>66</sup> For Banna, her career-long process of transforming her physical weakness into strength culminates with her assuming the subject position of cancer itself. In effect, what Banna appears to be saying is: ‘I’ll be a cancer on cancer.’

If Banna is referring to literal cancer here – in the sense of the disease or condition – she is clearly also referring to what she perceives as the figurative or symbolic cancer that is the occupation. By emphasizing that it is cancer that has a sickness, not her, Banna projects her illness onto the colonial other. It is not Banna but ‘the other’ (referring to the Israeli occupation) that is diseased, impaired, and sick. Sander L. Gilman’s work on the dialectical relationship between disease and otherness is particularly useful here in understanding Banna’s attempt to invert the relationship between herself, her illness, and the occupation. Writing in the context of Western representations of disease, Gilman posits that “it is the fear of collapse, the sense of dissolution, which contaminates the Western image of all diseases.” For Gilman, this fear “does not remain internalized” but “rather we project [it] onto the world in order to localize it and, indeed, to domesticate it. For once we locate it, the fear of our own dissolution is removed. Then it is not we who totter on the brink of collapse, but rather the Other.”<sup>67</sup>

While the attempt to create psychological distancing from illness is clearly at play in Banna’s words, this distancing is replete with a new political intimacy: Banna’s words appear to suggest that if the ‘other’ is plagued with cancer, then she [Banna] will oppose this ‘other’ through her own acts of resistance. By repeatedly reminding her listeners that she “doesn’t care,” that she’ll “keep rejecting,” and “always be in resistance” she gives political meaning and action to this process of separation between self and illness and between self and other. Banna’s insistence that, despite all the difficulties she is facing, she will continue to “be in

the service of Palestine, and her people” further heightens the political undertones and articulations of the song. In all these ways, “I Don’t Care” captures the ways in which the the trauma of colonial history and the individual trauma of illness often overlap, intersect, and feed into each other in her song and in the album more broadly.

In the song “Warda Fi al-Ma ‘raka [A Rose in the Battlefield],” Banna also imagines and reconfigures herself as the symbolic bride of Palestine tasked with retelling the stories of her homeland’s past and her people’s relationship to the land. It describes a “bride,” who appears in the “public squares, weaving stories from her shawl and memories that flow over the marble whiteness.” Yet, this moment of poetic and nostalgic performance is short-lived, for “when the wind crept in malice towards the spring,” Banna relates that “they amputated her breast [...] and her wounds bled down to her legs [..].” The bride’s “singing turned to silence,” but Banna ends her lyrics with the defiant affirmation that this silenced bride “was hiding one thousand revolutions in her braid.”<sup>68</sup> More significantly, the allegorical function of the bride motif is, once again, to attach and merge the physical body of Banna with Palestine’s body politic: the wounded body of the bride (Banna) again becomes a signifier of the wounded Palestinian nation. Both bodies – the physical and the national – however, continue to resist despite or because of their wounds. In singing about her personal and national body Banna, thus, offers a further variation on the theme of cancer as both a literal and a metaphorical state.

Finally, Banna’s career-long attempt to ally her physical body with Palestine’s national body reaches its conclusion in her final song “Maryam”. The song begins by once again locating the singer as the physical or material embodiment of Palestinian national symbols:

Me, whose olive trees  
crack the solid rocks  
drink the water of the rain  
and let the olive oil flow in my veins.

Speaking of ancient Syro-Palestine war goddess Anat, Banna relates that the former is: “running the meadows / ascending the mountains, descending the valleys / fighting the monsters of the wilderness.” For Banna, Anat becomes the mythical goddess who is trying to save both the singer’s physical body and Palestine’s national body. Yet, intriguingly, intermixed with this mythography are recordings of phone conversations that Banna had while she was in Berlin receiving medical treatment in 2016. Following the lines that describe her drinking the water rain and allowing the olives to flow in her vein, Banna confesses to an unknown caller:

I am in Berlin  
I had breathing problems before  
but they became worse here.  
So I came to the hospital ...  
I am going to be fine  
I am currently getting radiotherapy

As she tells of a “land of myrrh and secrets and charm” and asks “who will bring medicine to my beloved?” she again interrupts the lyrics with another phone conversation:

There’s an issue with a gland  
exerting pressure on a nerve  
It is connected to the diaphragm and my vocal cords my eye.  
This pressure is causing problems  
The diaphragm is too high  
Pressuring my lungs,  
That’s why I can’t breathe properly ...  
Each time I go into the radiotherapy room  
I hear the music that comes from the machine ...<sup>69</sup>

In “Maryam,” Banna thus synthesises a rich symbolic register evoking the Palestinian relationship to their land with a deeply intimate audio diary of her daily gruelling medical treatment.

To what genre, finally, does *Sawt al-Muqawama* [Voice of Resistance] belong? To conclude, I would like to propose that Banna’s posthumous album offers a kind of memoir in

sonic form of the body in crisis, be it the individual or the national. It is a memoir which, as Lisa Diedrich puts it, expresses “a movement in (the embodied self in relation to itself and to death) and a movement out (the embodied self in relation to others; to institutions, including in particular the institution of medicine; and to communities, national and otherwise).”<sup>70</sup> After all, the album’s greatest sonic accomplishment is to incorporate this ‘outside’ within the intimate body of the music itself via samples of medical scans and other found recordings. If “the sonic representation of Palestine – thematically and materially – is Banna’s theme,” as a review in the music magazine *Wire* relates, “she undertakes her project in a way that is inseparable from that region’s contested histories,”<sup>71</sup> – to which I would only add that she undertakes it in way that is inseparable from the contested history of her own body. Perhaps most importantly, Banna’s album is also a vindication of Stella Bolaki’s claim that the genre of illness narrative opens up into media other than the literary. For Banna, this illness narrative does not – to borrow Bolaki’s words – “rely exclusively on linguistic expression to give shape to experiences of physical and emotional distress,”<sup>72</sup> but opens new sonic and rhythmic emotional landscapes outside the spoken or written word. In the end, Banna’s album provides what Deidrich has, in the context of illness memories, calls an “effective and affective” history<sup>73</sup> (– both of her own body and that of the Palestinian body politic.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> To make the article accessible to an Anglophone reader, I use a general system of transliteration and use only the *ayn* (‘) and *hamza* (’). I also refer to names and titles of people, places, and texts in the form most familiar to an English-speaking audience and/or in the form used by the works under discussion themselves. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Arabic are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Composed in the 1930’s.

<sup>3</sup> Claudine Herzlich and Janine Pierret. *Illness and Self in Society* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1987), 54-58.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness and Metaphor and Aids and its Metaphor* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Sontag, *Illness*, 7; 65-66; 84-85.

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. in Stephen Graham, “Bulldozers and Bombs: The Latest Palestinian–Israeli Conflict as Asymmetric Urbicide,” *Antipode* 34, no. 4(2002): 647-648, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00259>.

- <sup>7</sup> Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 227.
- <sup>8</sup> *Masada 2000* was a California-based website described as being “extreme pro-Israel, anti-Palestinian.” Richard Edwards, “Masada2000.org,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Political, Social, and Military History*, ed. Spencer C. Tucker. Santa Barbara (California: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 669.
- <sup>9</sup> Stuart Schoffman, “From Heaven to Hypochondria: Metaphors of Jewish Healing,” in *Midrash & Medicine: Healing Body and Soul in the Jewish Interpretive Tradition*, ed. Rabbi William Cutter (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011), 22.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Mohammad Abu al-Fahim, *Al-Istitan: Khalaya Sarataniya* [The Settlements: Cancerous Cells] (Beirut: Dar Ibn Rushd, 2017).
- <sup>11</sup> Bichara Khader, “Europe and the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1973-1983: An Arab Perspective,” in *European Foreign Policy-Making and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, ed. David John Allen and Alfred Pijpers (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984), 161.
- <sup>12</sup> Sontag, *Illness*, 87.
- <sup>13</sup> Arnold Weinstein, “Afterword: Infection as Metaphor,” *Literature and Medicine*, 22, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2003.0012>.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.
- <sup>15</sup> Rim Banna, *Jafra* [Jaffa], no label, 1985, CD; Rim Banna, *Dumu'ik ya Umi* [Your Tears, Mother], no label, 1986, CD.
- <sup>16</sup> They have since divorced.
- <sup>17</sup> In 1994, she was honored as the Ambassador of Peace in Italy and in 1997 she was named Public Figure of the Year by the Tunisian Ministry of Culture. In 2000, she won the Palestine Award for Singing, marking the first instance in which such an award is presented to a woman. In 2013, she won the Ibn Rushd award for Freedom of Thought and in 2016 the Palestinian Ministry of Culture named her Person of the Year.
- <sup>18</sup> Rim Banna, *al-Hilm* [The Dream], no label, 1993, CD.
- <sup>19</sup> Qtd. in Ahmad Melhem, “Death does not stop voice of this Palestinian singer,” *Al-Monitor*, May 25, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/05/rim-banna-releases-album-after-death.html>.
- <sup>20</sup> Martina Sabra, “Palestinian Singer Rim Banna: Music and Cultural Self-Assertion,” *Qantara.de*, February 21, 2006, <https://en.qantara.de/content/palestinian-singer-rim-banna-music-and-cultural-self-assertion>.
- <sup>21</sup> Qtd. in Melhem, “Death Does Not Stop.”
- <sup>22</sup> Her songs have also featured in a number of films, including Palestinian Elia Suleiman’s *Al-Hilm al-‘Arabi* [The Arab Dream] as well as in the films of Lebanese and Swiss directors.
- <sup>23</sup> Rim Banna, “Sarah,” track 5 on *Maraya al-Ruh* [The Mirrors of my Soul], Valley Entertainment, 2005, CD.
- <sup>24</sup> Rim Banna, “Fares Awdeh [Fares Odeh],” track 9 on *Maraya al-Ruh* [The Mirrors of my Soul].
- <sup>25</sup> Rim Banna, “Teeri U Hadi Ya Wazi [Fly and Slow Down, Goose],” track 3 on *Wahduha Ibtibqa al-Quds* [Al-Quds Everlasting], no label, 2002, CD.
- <sup>26</sup> Rim Banna, “Ya Leil Ma Atwalak [This Never Ending Night],” track 4 on *Lullabies from the Axis of Evil*, Kirkelig Kulturverksted & Valley Entertainment, 2004.
- <sup>27</sup> Commenting on the ways in which Banna’s songs have captured the stories of Palestine people, Ramzy Baroud explains that “in her music, Rim fought against the Israeli attempts at the cultural dispossession of the Palestinian people, while humanizing the likes of Fares, Sarah and many others.” He adds that her work “supersedes politics and geography into a realm in which the Palestinian nationhood was made of shared culture, grief, resistance, poetry and hope.” Ramzy Baroud, “Rim Banna and the Cultural War that Palestinians Must Win,” *teleSUR*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/opinion/Rim-Banna-and-the-Cultural-War-that-Palestinians-Must-Win-20180403-0015.html>.
- <sup>28</sup> Louis Brehony, “Rim Banna: A Symbol of Life and Unity,” *PalestinianChronicle.com*, March 25, 2018, <http://www.palestinechronicle.com/rim-banna-symbol-life-unity/>.
- <sup>29</sup> These are political volunteering camps that saw Palestinians from all walks of life gather together.
- <sup>30</sup> Rim Banna, “INTERVIEW: Exclusive with singer Rim Banna,” interview by Mohammed El-Sabagh, *Cairo Post*, January 20, 2014, <http://archive.li/tuddB#selection-351.0-360.1>.
- <sup>31</sup> Qtd. in Noam Ben-Zeev, “Music Became a Weapon,” *Haaretz*, 20 July, 2005, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/1.4922981>.
- <sup>32</sup> Rim Banna & Henrik Koitzsch, *Lam Takun Tilka Hikayati* [This Was Not My Story], Un Mundo Mejor, 2006, CD.
- <sup>33</sup> Evan C. Gutierrez, “Rim Banna Biography,” *All Music*, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/rim-banna-mn0000868201/biography>.
- <sup>34</sup> Qtd. in Brehony, “Rim Banna.”
- <sup>35</sup> Banna, “INTERVIEW.”

- <sup>36</sup> Rana Husseini, “Remembering Rim Banna,” *Sister-hood*, 27 March, 2018, <http://sister-hood.com/rana-husseini/remembering-rim-banna/>
- <sup>37</sup> Qtd. in Louis Brehony, “Rim Banna.”
- <sup>38</sup> Qtd. in Hanan Habiballah, “Rim Banna Ba’d Shifaiha [Rim Banna After Her Recovery],” *Kul al-Arab*, May 15, 2010, <https://www.alarab.com/Article/299719>.
- <sup>39</sup> Anne Hunasker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1999), 27, 29.
- <sup>40</sup> Rim Banna, Palestine TV, interview, Youtube video, 14:12, posted October 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PE0tr5anyBI>.
- <sup>41</sup> Rim Banna, *Dunyana* [Our World], interview by Nada Abdel Samad, BBC Arabic, Youtube video, 12:40, posted August 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZ5gwsjc8OQ>.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 97.
- <sup>44</sup> Other references to cancer include *al-marad illi mabyitsama* [the disease not to be named].
- <sup>45</sup> Abir Hamdar, *The Female Suffering Body: Illness and Disability in Modern Arabic Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014).
- <sup>46</sup> For studies on Arab women and health see, for example, Farha Ghannam, “Fertile, Plump and Strong: The Social Construction of Female body in low income Cairo,” *Monographs in Reproductive Health Number 3* (Cairo: Population Council Regional Office for West Asia, 1997); and Afamia Kaddour, Raghda Hafez & Huda Zurayk, “Women’s Perceptions of Reproductive Health in Three Communities Around Beirut, Lebanon,” *Reproductive Health Matters* 13, no. 25 (2005): 34-42.
- <sup>47</sup> Rim Banna, *Dunyana*.
- <sup>48</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 193.
- <sup>49</sup> Rim Banna, *Dunyana*.
- <sup>50</sup> Rim Banna, Palestine TV.
- <sup>51</sup> Hawkins, 105.
- <sup>52</sup> A liqueur traditionally made and consumed in several Middle Eastern countries.
- <sup>53</sup> Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 241.
- <sup>54</sup> Bargu, *Starve*, 272.
- <sup>55</sup> Bargu, *Starve*, 15.
- <sup>56</sup> During this period, Banna took to designing various Palestinian embroidery.
- <sup>57</sup> Rim Banna, *Sabahuna Gheir* [Our Morning is Different], interview by Afaf Sheeny and Dureid Ldawy, Palestine 48 TV, Youtube video, 13:27, posted January, 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2wNcaPrIvM>.
- <sup>58</sup> Writing in the context of the Algerian War, Fanon demonstrates how the colonial doctor was not “socially defined by the exercise of his professionalism” but rather was perceived as yet another facet of an occupying force. Franz Fanon, “Medicine and Colonialism” in *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 134.
- <sup>59</sup> Rim Banna, *Sabahuna Gheir*.
- <sup>60</sup> Rim Banna, *Bayt al-Qaseed*, [The Bottom Line], interview by Zahi Wehbe, Al-Mayadeen TV, Youtube video, 1:12:43, posted 6 Sept, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYTjHWAKPJo>.
- <sup>61</sup> Kamel Hawwash, “Farewell to Rim Banna, Palestinian Cultural Icon,” *The Arab Weekly*, April 1, 2018, <https://theArabweekly.com/farewell-rim-banna-palestinian-cultural-icon>.
- <sup>62</sup> Former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad also wrote on his Facebook page: “For your spirit of mercy and serenity, Reem, your voice will remain rebellious, and your revolution against injustice will inspire the coming generations of Palestine” (@Salam.Fayyad, March 24, 2018).
- <sup>63</sup> The record label was established in 1974 by Erik Hillestad, who is a producer and lyricist.
- <sup>64</sup> It was initiated in 2004 by Tunisian SC Mocha and Palestinian SC Yosh. It has an avant-garde reputation in terms of the Arabic underground music scene. Its compositions are drawn from the daily soundscape of war and conflict in the Middle East.
- <sup>65</sup> Wesseltoft started his career in a punk rock band and has extensive experience working in electronic music.
- <sup>66</sup> Rim Banna, “La Ubali [I don’t Care],” track 7 on *Sawt al-Muqawama* [Voice of Resistance], Kirkelig Kulturverksted, 2018, CD.
- <sup>67</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 1.
- <sup>68</sup> Rim Banna, “Warda Fi al-Ma ‘raka [A Rose in the Battlefield],” track 2 on *Voice of Resistance*.
- <sup>69</sup> Banna, “Maryam,” track 15 on *Voice of Resistance*.
- <sup>70</sup> Lisa Diedrich, *Treatments: Language, Politics and the Culture of Illness* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xix.

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<sup>71</sup> Louise Gray, “Rim Banna: Voice of Resistance,” Review of “Voice of Resistance,” by Rim Banna, *The Wire Magazine*, issue 412, June 2018, 52.

<sup>72</sup> Stella Bolaki, *Illness as Many Narratives: Arts, Medicine and Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 71.

<sup>73</sup> Diedrich, *Treatments*, xviii.



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