

University of Washington

Women Who Rock Oral History Project

Transcript

Barni Axmed Qaasim

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Barni Axmed Qaasim (BQ): My name is Barni Axmed Qaasim and I consent to this interview.

Rebecca Simms (RS): Where were you raised and how does that connect to your filmmaking experience?

BQ: My experience in Somalia was full of love and family and culture and when I was four years old I moved to Arizona with my mother who is American, European descent and I was raised in Phoenix which is a little, it's a very different environment. There's a lot of culture there and it's a really creative place. I feel that there's so much talent that comes out of Phoenix but I feel that a lot of the reason, especially for the Somali and the Latino community there we face a lot of adversity. It's a very racist and conservative place and so I feel that the people who grew up there, I think we reacted by becoming very creative and I feel really proud to have grown up in Phoenix because I feel like there's some of the best artists, DJs, graffiti artists, filmmakers that come out of that very oppressive environment and I feel like growing up there I was really privileged to work with a lot of people. Even though we felt stifled in Phoenix, in that environment, I was really lucky because I was drawing from my African tradition which Somali people, we're a nation of poets and so we have a really strong oral history. My father was educated around the campfire by my grandmother who would tell stories and that was his education and that was the only education for his siblings but my father went to go on to school, elementary

school and high school and then eventually college. So, that really influences my art because I feel that my filmmaking is very different from American filmmaking. I feel it draws from, it's really saturated with art, with music, with storytelling, with poetry. And then I also feel like its very, its not mainstream because I also grew up in Phoenix where my community was really rejected from the mainstream and it gave me this great opportunity to do something different and create something different so I feel really privileged to have both of those backgrounds.

RS: Could you talk about the connection between filmmaking and community in your experience?

BQ: My filmmaking is almost all based in community work and social justice work. I don't, I'm an artist but I don't create art to create art. I make art to support the community, to build a world that, where we take care of mother earth and where we take care of each other, so film is a vehicle for that. I don't make film or make video pieces to make something creative that stands alone. I do it because I'm inspired by the amazing work of my community and by the amazing work of people around me that are struggling against injustice and struggling for an alternative.

RS: Can you talk about the style of storytelling in your films and your process of creating them?

BQ: Well I think documentary film is a really humbling experience. I'm not scripting something and creating, directing what I want to see. I'm going and witnessing something and I'm witnessing the strength or efficacy of the community and then I, personally as an artist and as a woman I, when I'm editing I do a lot of prayer and a lot of time humbling myself to the people and to the community and to the long-term vision of the work that they do. So often I get all this amazing footage and I just, I humble myself to say you know what is the best story that can come out of this? So for me editing is not, it's not necessarily primarily technical it's not primarily artistic, it's a spiritual process because I'm trying to coax out the story that needs to be told, that will inspire people and that'll uplift the work of the community that I'm representing. So I also think that the way that I tell stories is rooted in Somali oral tradition. I'm inspired by my grandmother, by my Auntie Sofia who was the holder of all the stories in my family. My Eedo Sephia, she was the one who knew all the stories, knew all the poems, all the traditional stories in my family. And also by great literature, Nuruddin Farah is a Somali writer and often his books start with a poem that describes the essence of the piece, the linear story he's going to tell and I see that in my work especially the films that I've done start off with a creative montage or a visual poem and then go into the story of what happens. So I feel what I want to do is bring that tradition, that really you know ancient and strong tradition of storytelling and bring it into modern tools like film, video and also tell these modern stories that are really American and really urban, really western but draw from that proud, rich history of storytelling.

RS: Who has inspired you? How have they influenced your work?

BQ: I think a lot of my video work comes out of inspiration by people that are doing social justice work, by people that are doing community organizing. And I often get inspired by the work that they're doing to create a better world and to create a more just society and then I'll do a piece to support their work or to tell part of the story that they're creating. One of, Ida B. Wells was an African-American Journalist who actually pioneered investigative journalism because of her work telling the stories of people who were survivors, or people who witnessed lynchings in the south. So, for me I really draw from that legacy because she was an innovative, talented, African-American woman who was making leaps and bounds in journalism but she was doing it primarily to serve the people and to tell the story of lynchings and to work against lynchings. So, again she wasn't an artist for art's sake, she was a woman who was rooted in her community who was working for her community and I think that that grounding, that spiritual grounding, and your feeling for what this world should be like can empower your work more. And I think, as an artist, the way that I work best and the way that I feel most proud of my work is when I'm doing something that I feel is going to help the world become more just and support people and support mother earth.

RS: Could you talk about the process of starting Iftiin Productions?

BQ: I think the reason I started making video and the reason I could see a future for myself in documentary film is when digital video came out and suddenly it became accessible for people from working-class families to create video. And then that's only increased since everyone's been putting video online and so I think that, that technological change empowered me to feel like this is something I could feasibly do. So, I think once I saw that I had access to the tools I realized there's a place for me in making documentary and making film. So I don't feel that I'm rooted in a larger filmmaker community. I feel that when I'm making films I'm kind of doing something new because I feel that in the past film was so expensive and it's something that's kind of only for the elite. So I started Iftiin Productions in maybe 2006, 2005 and I'm starting to meet people who are likeminded, filmmakers who are likeminded. I work with a collective in south Tucson, Pan Left Productions, it's radical filmmakers. But when I started Iftiin Productions, Iftiin means light in Somali, and it was really to use video to shine light on Somali women and strong Somali women that are doing, creating a better world and so, yeah I don't know if that answers your question.

RS: Yeah. How did you learn how to be a filmmaker and storyteller?

BQ: I grew up in Phoenix, Arizona and I went to South Mountain High School and there was a media course you could take there and I took the journalism course but there were people that were doing video production as well as radio. And so that was my first experience on the south side of Phoenix seeing these tools in the hands of people like myself, my peers. And then when I was in college I didn't really have a clear focus on what my study was but I got a job filming weddings. And so I think, you know, it's a very kind of working-class entrance into this work and I'm really

proud of that and happy about that because when I started filming weddings on the side I was working full time and going to school full time. I really fell in love with it. I was like, this is something that's technical, this is something that's creative, this is something that's intellectual and it's also something that I can serve my community. So I think it was through working and through serving my community that I learned about video and realized that it was something that I could do myself.

RS: Can you talk about the projects that you have created and been involved with?

BQ: My first documentary was A Little Rebirth about my Somali community in Phoenix. And it's a documentary about the refugee association that my father and other Somali immigrants and refugees started to serve the new refugees. And I wanted to document that amazing history because I feel like there's a small but very strong Somali community in Phoenix and I'm really proud of it. So that was my first piece and since then I just finished a documentary Catching Babies about women learning midwifery. I filmed it in El Paso, Texas and it was in honor of my best friend I grew up with whose grandmother was a partera and a curandera in New Mexico and then went to study, get state licensed [in] midwifery. And I think that that film, for me, is showing that indigenous women, and African women, and all women, from all over the world throughout history, have this really amazing calling to help other women during the most powerful journey of their life, through giving birth. So that's a project that I'm really excited about and proud. I also, in 2010, I returned to Phoenix and worked with my friends that were there working against SB 1070 and I did organizing and I did video to support that movement and that's also something that I'm really proud of. It was, you know, financially a very tough time but I was there volunteering like everyone else was to fight against unjust immigration laws and fight against an unjust economic global system that's forcing people from their homes. And I'm so proud. My father wrote me from Africa and was like, I'm so proud of you that you have the opportunity and the skills to serve this community and you'll always remember that you did work to help people when you could. And, you know, that's something I'm really proud of.

AM: How have you empowered yourself to be an activist through the social justice media that you create?

BQ: I think art is so important to social justice work. I don't think that, as artists that support the work of grassroots organizers, I don't think that we're just allies I think that we're actually creating culture. So I think that we have an opportunity through making film, making songs, making silkscreens, doing murals that are about the struggle, we actually have a unique opportunity to maybe influence people who maybe aren't on our side to begin with. So I feel grassroots organizers, you know, are great at, you know reaching people and changing people's ideas but I think art is really really key in that because we're creating a culture. We're inspiring people on an emotional and spiritual level in a way that engaging someone in a political debate is not always as effective and sometimes it turns people away. So I think as a

filmmaker that supports media justice I'm not just, you know, I am serving the community but I'm also part of the community.

RS: What are some of the social issues and groups that you support through your work?

BQ: Well, I think that my film, my work, intentionally or not always comes back to women that are making change. And as someone that was, you know, born in another country I think often I gravitate towards immigrant women and, you know, women that are working class and urban women. So I think that I get excited about different issues like birth justice or migrants rights or I feel responsible for these issues because, you know the migrants rights issue I didn't consciously want to be a part of but I had a responsibility as someone who was raised in Phoenix where they're passing these terrible laws I felt that I had to stand up [to] and, somebody who was from that community, it was my duty to work against it in any way that I could. So, you know, women's rights, immigrant rights, women of color's rights are themes that always come up and I kind of always end up working with people doing work like that.

RS: What impact do you hope your work has on the viewer?

BQ: I hope that my films, I don't like to make, sometimes I make videos that are really have a strong message against an injustice. But the work that I'm most proud of and that I like the most of the work I've created is usually a profile of a person, a story of a person's transformation. It tells a story that anyone can relate to. So I think the pieces that I get the most feedback on and that I also feel the most proud of are stories of people that are making change in their community. So I hope that the, that people see those videos and feel inspired to do work themselves. I hope, my biggest dream for my work is that it touches people on an emotional level and then they can, they don't feel overwhelmed by all the problems of the world but they feel inspired by the hope, by the change, that the work that is being done to create a more just society. So I hope that my work touches people on an emotional level.

RS: Looking forward 20 years from now, how do you think that social justice video is going to change?

BQ: I felt empowered to make video when I had access to digital media when it was taken out of, you know, film. And I hope that in twenty years from now, it's going to be increased and that more people from working-class and immigrant backgrounds feel that they have the capacity to make video and the capacity to use sound and images to tell a story. I think, from what I'm seeing, that's only increasing and I'm really inspired by all the amazing content I see on the Internet, videos, people making music videos, people making histories, speaking out against things that move them in, like, blog testimonies. I feel that technology has caught up to the need for people that don't have access to tons of capital and don't have access to studios to make their own messages heard and broadcast. And I think that

technology, technology is moving towards democratizing people's access to tell their stories and I feel really hopeful. I feel that there's people who are writing code, people who are writing open-source code, people who are putting videos online doing music videos online. I think that in twenty years from now there's going to be an alternative media that's totally, you know, people aren't going to need to watch the big studios and the broadcast houses. I'm really excited about content sharing online. I'm really excited about open source code, file sharing, WikiLeaks, all these technologies that are making poor people able to connect with each other and to broadcast our stories. I think in the next twenty years we're going to see it blow up and I think that your average inner-city kid is not going to have to turn on BET or NBC or FOX. I think that they're going to be watching their peers' media through their telephones, through their computers.

RS: Do you feel that this movement of being empowered to create media will lead to more social activism?

BQ: I do. I feel that I was in a really unique position to watch the mentality in Phoenix totally transform when SB 1070 became a law. Before that, there was people doing amazing work against all the anti-migrant laws that were coming, you know, a few of them every year to make life really hard for immigrants in Arizona. But when I was growing up, there was not, people didn't feel empowered to fight against that. People did not feel empowered to do social activism grassroots organizing. And I saw the city I grew up with and the people I grew up with totally transform and after these laws were passed, and the next one more ridiculous than the past, people became really inspired. And that talent, that incredible creative talent that I saw and grew up with and was blessed to be around in Phoenix; all the great talent in Phoenix, that what was sparking people. You know, people were inspired by the murals, by the graffiti, by the hip-hop songs, by all the different music that was coming out during that time. There was, you know, Phoenix does not have a very big African-American community but the African-American community stood up and started making all these rap songs against the anti-immigrant laws. And you saw this unity, black and brown unity that wasn't really, it was there but wasn't so prominent before, and I think that for young people, it was the art that really sparked that. And there was so much great art that was coming out of graphic design, poster design, cartoons, music, the music videos that came with the songs and I think that that really sparked people. I think that as we have this ability to communicate because the Internet is kind of democratizing broadcast and our ability to communicate with each other. People are going to become inspired by that and artists, musicians, visual artists, media artists, we're creating the culture that defines our generation. And I think that as our artists become more empowered and feel more that their voice is heard in the struggle against injustice, they're going to spark so many people in the community to feel that they can go to the streets. And I think filmmakers have a really unique role in that because we have the capacity to really articulate the specifics of a movement. So, you know, there's so many great muralists in Phoenix that do kind of abstract images of what's wrong, but filmmakers are the ones that can articulate, "hey, because of this protest,

because of this petition, this is what happened.” This is how we saw the change. And when I first went to Phoenix, or when I first returned to Phoenix in 2010, immigration and Sheriff Arpaio’s office was doing raids and these crazy expensive actions on car washes, on fast food restaurants to get the so-called “criminals”, who really are doing the civil infraction of immigration violation which does not warrant arrest and does not warrant incarceration to terrorize the community. And now, after all the social activism that came out of that movement, of that really difficult struggle in Phoenix, now what happens is the I.C.E., Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, will send a letter to a business. You have sixty days to become in compliance with immigration policy. So you don’t have raids anymore and that’s because of the social activism work. And filmmakers earn a unique position because we can really articulate that and connect the dots. Because it’s not, it’s creative, it’s technological, but it’s also very intellectual so we can say “because of A, B.” So I think that all artists have a responsibility to encourage social justice work and social activism. And filmmakers have such a unique responsibility and a unique privilege to be able to really articulate how that happens, what the results are and good job guys, you know, your work is really making a change and you should join the struggle because the work that they’re doing is making a change.

RS: Is there anything else that you would like to add to your oral history?

BQ: Yeah. I think one thing that I’ve learned as I’ve worked making films is that the work is not just about technical feat and it’s not just about developing your skills and developing your talent. I think for all artists, and especially for female artists, the first step to making great art is believing in yourself. And I think it took me a long time to understand that I could direct a film. It took me a long time to understand that I have a perspective and the stories that I want to tell other people might want to hear. And I had to really center myself and really ground myself in my spirituality, in my family, in my tradition, in my culture to understand that I could have a voice as an artist. So I think that creating great art, especially for women is about believing in yourself. And it’s not about your education, it’s not about your access to fancy equipment, it’s about your belief in your own voice and your belief in something higher than yourself. And that your story is important, in that you can communicate with many people and that that’s really valid and that’s really important. So I think that the first step to becoming an artist and especially a woman in this society, a female artist, is believing in yourself and loving yourself and believing in your voice.