

Immigrant Farmworker Youth's Right to Aspire: A Review of Two Films

Robin Maria DeLugan

University of California, Merced

Fruits of Labor. 2021. 77 minutes, color. A film by Emily Cohen Ibáñez. <https://www.fruitsoflaborfilm.com>

First Time Home. 2021. 29 minutes, color. A film by Esmirna Librado, Noemi Librado Sanchez, Esmeralda Ventura, and Heriberto Ventura, produced by Seth Holmes and Maria Megana Lopez. <https://www.firsttimehomefilm.com>

As an anthropology professor at a public research university in the heart of California's Central Valley, a region dominated by an agricultural industry with a global reach, I have become increasingly aware of the struggles and harsh realities of immigrant farmworkers and their families. It's often the case that those same people, growing and harvesting the food we eat, can be seen at work near state highways, where we can witness firsthand their back-breaking labor in the fields. Unfortunately, these front-line workers are otherwise largely invisible to our broader society and policymakers, even as they continue to toil, especially during the current pandemic. How do we make these immigrants visible without centering solely on their suffering or toil? To what extent can we begin to expand how we understand the material conditions of immigrant laborers in relation to their aspirations for better futures? How can film drive this kind of complex portrayal, and what are the limits of visual representation?

The documentary films *Fruits of Labor* and *First Time Home* grapple explicitly with these questions by focusing their anthropological and cinematic gaze on youth. Many of these young people are in our college classrooms, living lives that are flattened when thinking of them merely as "students." As such, both films focus on the collaborations between anthropologists and youth from farmworker communities to raise awareness about the complex concerns and aspirations of these first-generation Latinx and Indigenous youth. This generation of young people raised (if not born) in the United States are enlarging their sense of belonging and their hopes for the future, while advocating for themselves and their communities, despite the marginalization that accompanies so many immigrant farmworker's lives.

Fruits of Labor focuses on Ashley Solis, a high school senior in Watsonville, California, often locally known as "Fresaville" for the intensive strawberry agribusiness that dominates the local economy. Ashley and anthropologist/filmmaker Emily Cohen Ibáñez cowrote the screenplay for the film, which features the realities of Ashley's everyday life and the central concerns of most teens: attending the senior prom, worrying about successfully graduating, and pondering the future. In addition, Ashley is the oldest child in her family, and her mother has depended on her since Ashley was 15 to help support the family financially. For Ashley, this means working in the local strawberry fields during the summer and from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. in a processing plant following the seasonal harvest. As a result, she's often too tired to go to school, yet her mother urges her to study more and complete high school, not just as her wish for her daughter but as a vision for her "to be a better citizen, a better woman, a better person in the world." Ashley's mother and some of her neighbors remain undocumented, and their fear of the Trump administration's deportation activities through ICE motivates them to seek legal aid and prepare documents that would allow Ashley to be the legal guardian of her siblings should her mother be deported.

With the enormous burden of her work and duties, Ashley almost gives up on high school. Yet she manages to juggle her responsibilities, including the Youth Growing Justice community garden project she co-leads, where her farmworker neighbors can grow their own food and through which the public can be educated about her neighbors' concerns. At a school event, as the project's spokesperson, she demonstrates how the community garden resulted from research the youth conducted and thereby confirmed that food insecurity was a key problem for their neighbors. We thus see Ashley's youth leadership in action, and she does manage to attend the prom and graduate from high school. Throughout the film, Ashley poetically and philosophically communicates her fears, her uncertainties, and her aspirations. The film also suggests a connection with her ethnic roots, including a prayer-like voiceover in an Indigenous language and a reflection on the words of her *curandera* (healer) grandmother: "from scared turtle to flower in bloom" and how "wild fruits remind me of my ancestry." As the film ends, we learn that Ashley has completed her first year of community

college, and viewers are likely to hope that her perseverance and resilience will continue to serve her, her family, and her community. The film is featured on the PBS award-winning documentary series POV.

Where *Fruits of Labor* does not center on Ashley's Indigeneity, *First Time Home*, a short film made by youth from farmworker families in California and Washington, emphasizes their Triqui identity. Triqui are Indigenous people from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, and the film is trilingual in Triqui, Spanish, and English, as are the filmmakers. Unlike other Oaxacan Indigenous communities, such as Zapotec and Mixtec, who have a longer history of migration to the United States, the Triqui only began migrating northward in the 1990s. There are now 25,000 Triqui in Mexico and 10,000 in the United States today, a demographic fact with many implications for cultural survival. In *First Time Home*, the filmmakers express how other American students treat them differently for being Oaxacan, for being dark-skinned, for being short, or even for being assumed to be stupid. One filmmaker says, "We are different, but we are also the same. We are all human." The intersectional identity of these Mexican Indigenous-heritage youth from impoverished farmworker families certainly complicates how they navigate the world around them and their aspirations for the future.

First Time Home documents a 2016 visit to their ancestral hometown of San Martin Ituyoso in Oaxaca to meet relatives in person for the first time. The film opens with an image of farmworkers toiling in the mud and stormy weather before moving into their journey, primarily to see a seriously ill grandfather. As the youth, who are cousins, prepare for the hometown journey, the film poignantly conveys the emotional impact of their parents' family separation and the personal sacrifice integral to the migration experience. Because their parents are unable to travel to Mexico, the youth record messages of love and concern to share directly with the faraway family members. When in San Martin, the youth see firsthand a peaceful but impoverished rural Mexican community and better understand why the residents depend on support from families in the United States. The film thus captures a tender family reunion, with the youth helping with local chores, enjoying a fun-filled community Christmas celebration, and sharing an emotional goodbye with their rediscovered family. After the youth return to the United States, we see them gather to watch messages from the family members in Oaxaca, and the US family expresses newfound pride in their place of origin. Just as the film opened with farmworkers in the field, the film's closing images show community members at a public event as they hold up signs that read "No Family Separation," "Alto a las Deportaciones" (Stop the Deportations), and "Farmworkers Make America Great." Here, the youth remind us that the lives of farmworker families are inescapably political and merit our attention and that our initial instinct to see them through toil alone must be expanded to recognize their loves, hopes, and commitment to making the world a better place.

First Time Home is also an innovative example of participatory ethnographic filmmaking and the commitment that ethical approaches to collaboration require. Medical anthropologist Seth Holmes coproduced the film with Miriam Magaña Lopez and accompanied the youth on their journey to and from Mexico. Holmes creates the kind of long-term trusted relationships that allow him to accompany the youth on their trip to Mexico. Such sincere relationships were captured best by one parent who termed Holmes's relationship with the youth "a sign of family." Holmes's collaboration with the youth entailed training them as filmmakers, while also taking seriously that their collaborative film ought to be something of high quality, which they could be proud of upon public viewing. Therefore, Holmes brought in consultant filmmaker Yolanda Cruz, animator Jesus Ibarri Rosales, and graphic designer Tlacolulokos to add a high-quality aesthetic to the film. Before the final credits roll, we learn that Noemi is now in her second year of high school and that Esmirna, Esmeralda, and Heriberto are planning to attend community college the next year. For those who want to get more involved, the film's website is displayed so that donations can be made to support Indigenous Triqui immigrant farmworker youth and young adults through scholarships for higher education and for mentorship through the Binational Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous Communities. The latter is an important binational organization working on behalf of Oaxacan migrants in Mexico and the United States.

These two documentaries are notable for elevating the voices of youth who speak about the realities and hardships endured by migrant farmworker families. In the process, these films demonstrate the power of collaborations that center fortitude, creativity, leadership, and aspiration. In watching these films, the viewer comes to understand more about the pressing issues of immigrant farmworkers, not only centered on suffering but also on the transformative potential of those serving and diversifying society.

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