An Extra Credit Video Critique  
of Laura Esquivel's,  
"Like Water For Chocolate"

**Introduction:**

The film, "Like Water For Chocolate," reveals to its viewers the life of Tita, a Mexican woman who is tormented by the beliefs, values and norms of her culture. The story is colorful, expressive and tragic and to me was also very interesting in terms of its cultural aspects. The beliefs, values and norms of the Mexican characters, as depicted in this work of cinematic fiction, differ very much from those of my urban, U.S. American culture, the culture I use as my avowal. However, I must point out that not all the characters in this film are in complete agreement with the beliefs, values and norms of the Mexican culture as shown in this film. Additionally, the cultural aspects depicted in this movie appear to be so much richer in comparison to my culture; as in comparison my urban, U.S. American culture (as seen through the eyes of a young female of this culture) seems to be very dull and simple. I repeat the use of the words, “film” and “movie” because I realize that the actual beliefs, values and norms of the Mexican culture may differ from what the directors, producers and actors have brought to this work of cinematic art.

In chapter four of our textbook, *Intercultural Competence*, beliefs, in part, are defined as “...the culture’s fundamental teachings about what reality is and expectations about how the world works...” Values are defined as “what a culture regards as good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, clean or dirty,
valuable or worthless, appropriate or inappropriate, and kind or cruel.” And
lastly, norms are described as, “the socially shared expectations of appropriate
behaviors.” The authors state that, “because norms are evident through
behaviors, they can be readily observed.” In the remaining part of this paper I
shall choose representative scenes to illustrate beliefs, values and norms and
then I shall compare and/or contrast these to my own beliefs, values and norms
as I personally interpret them through my upbringing as a young, urban, U.S.
American female.
Analysis of Beliefs, Values & Norms:

As the one scene I chose to be representative of a belief illustrates that there seems to be an expectation in the (film’s version of) Mexican culture that the youngest daughter must take care of her mother (perhaps both of her parents), until her mother’s death. This was evidenced in the scene where the film shows the viewers a growing love interest, actually a mutual love interest, between Tita and Pedro, but because Tita is the youngest daughter, this love interest cannot evolve into a marriage because Tita is expected to take care of her mother. So, when Pedro asks to marry Tita, Tita’s mother offers Tita’s sister, Rosaura, instead, for Pedro to marry. Pedro goes on to marry Rosaura and lives together with her family. We are led to believe he does this in order to be close to his true love, Tita, since he has absolutely no love for Rosaura. This scene differs in so many ways from what I believe to be my beliefs, which have been greatly influenced by my identification with the urban, U.S. American culture. First of all, my parents have never expressed to me that I need their permission to marry, nor does the person who will choose me need to ask for their permission. I also do not believe that my parents, or anyone in my family for that matter, would stop a person from marrying the person whom he/she loves. I believe that that particular decision belongs to the son or daughter alone. In my opinion this is a commonly shared U.S. American belief, not for all U.S. Americans, but for many, and perhaps even for most.
Secondly, both my brother and I are currently single, and have never yet been in a position of marriage, but as urban U.S. Americans we’ve never been taught that it is a belief that marriage needs to be sacrificed in order to provide care for either or both of our parents. I believe this is the case for all members of our immediate family, our extended family and for most, if not all of our friends. Nobody has an obligation to take care of or live with parents or elders. If someone in our family is too old to live alone or needs assistance, we will arrange to have a family member who is willing and is able to provide the help, do so, but this is not an obligation as the film would have one believe it is for the characters representing the Mexican culture in the film.

A scene I chose to represent a value is one in which food is shown to be of tremendous value. Nacha, the Mexican house cook in the film, believes strongly that certain foods have the power to transmit feelings, be they good or bad, when eaten. For example, on the eve of Rosaura and Pedro’s wedding, Tita prepares the wedding cake batter together with Nacha, but while preparing the batter she begins to cry out of sadness and fatigue. Her tears drop into the batter and Nacha exclaims that the tears will ruin the cake. As a result, the guests eat the cake the next day and they all begin to feel an overwhelming sense of longing for a loved one. Next they all feel sadness and finally they all get sick to their stomachs. I do not believe that many U.S. Americans would give so much power to food, certainly I, as a young, urban, female U.S. American, do not. There are myths surrounding some foods such as with the consumption of oysters and chocolate, but I don’t think many people in the U.S. truly value these foods for their
aphrodisiac powers; at least as a U.S. American, I certainly do not! Another example of a value is the scene in which after a few years of marriage and birth of a child, Rosaura had gained some weight. She feared that Pedro would stop touching her because of that weight gain. In other words, a weight gain was seen in the Mexican culture as a “negative value”. For me, and many of my family members and friends (and certainly the advertisement industry in this country as well), this is a shared value. I also do not wish to gain weight, as I believe it to make me less attractive. Intellectually I know that my “body shape” is not the total essence of who I am, yet I subscribe to this irrational value that I would be “worth” less if I gained a few pounds.

A change in cultural patterns is, to me, universal. For example when my grandparents and my parents married they told me it was expected that one should marry in one’s late teens or early twenties—that was the norm. It was also the norm that divorce was frowned upon. In this film portraying the Mexican culture, Tita, Pedro and Rosaura are also all young when contemplating marriage, and so this was shown to be a Mexican Norm. I am now in my late twenties and I find myself surrounded by colleagues at work, classmates at school and other relatives who are not yet married, nor am I and this is a norm for me as a young, female, urban, U.S. American. The norm regarding when one should marry in the United States has changed, and in my opinion this is a good change in some ways. We now wait for a longer time (this can be proven by checking the latest U.S. Census data for proof) before we marry but we also now divorce at the
highest rate ever in U.S. history. I hope to challenge the norm of the high divorce rate in the United States by, once being married, staying married and not getting divorced!

**Conclusion:**

The beliefs, values and norms exhibited in the film, “Like Water for Chocolate,” are very special. The character’s beliefs help form their vision and expectations of the world. The belief that a food has the power to affect the eater, while not a central belief, is still important in accepting how the world works. Nacha taught Tita that through food she could send emotions and feelings. Therefore food was to be valued as a means of power. The culture’s values or desired characteristics, are certainly the ideals that are of importance and provide a guideline of what is good or bad, important or unimportant. For instance, there was the value of fulfilling one’s obligation of being the youngest daughter. Tita did not personally approve of this value, but this approval had no relevance as this value was out of her control—it was culturally imposed upon her and all those in her surroundings. The cultures’ norms were evidenced in the behaviors exhibited throughout the film as they were direct manifestations of both the values and the beliefs from which these values emanated.

My young, female, urban, U.S. American culture and the Mexican culture (again, as depicted in a cinematic work of fiction) differ in many ways but are also similar in some ways. Both cultures exert a pressure for their women to be slim; for to be slim is to be valued as beautiful. Both condemn extramarital affairs, yet
both have members of their respective cultures that participate in these affairs (including the President of the United States!). Both cultures, in my opinion, view the crying of men to be considered a sign of weakness. These are the common links. Then there are the differences in marriage, family expectations, and especially in the power of food. Although these differences may exist between the two cultures, it does not negate the “fact” that deep down inside, we really are much more the same than different!