Alicia Gaspar de Alba is a professor in the Departments of Chicana/o Studies, English, and Women's Studies at UCLA. Originally from the El Paso/Juárez region, she earned B.A. and M.A. degrees in English–Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso and a Ph.D. in American Studies at the University of New Mexico. She arrived at UCLA in 1994. From 2007 to 2010 she served as Chair of the César E. Chávez Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies, of which she was a founding faculty member. Known to her students as “La Profe,” her classes cover a diverse array of topics, from Chicano/a cultural studies and the U.S./Mexico border to Chicana lesbian literature, barrio popular culture, and bilingual creative writing.


Gaspar de Alba has also organized three major conferences at UCLA. In 2001 “Otro Corazón: Queering the Art of Aztlán” was a tribute to the creative spirit of queer Chicana/o writers, critics, and visual and performance artists. In 2003, “The Maquiladora Murders, or, Who is Killing the Women of Juárez?” looked at the unsolved serial murders of women on the U.S./Mexico border since 1993. In 2010, “Sex y Corazón: Queer and Feminist Theory at the Vanguard of the New...
Chicana/o Studies” examined the impact of Chicana/o queer and feminist scholars on their fields over the last fifteen years.

In addition to her scholarly work, Gaspar de Alba is well known for her novels and poetry. Her debut historical novel, *Sor Juana’s Second Dream* (1999), a lesbian interpretation of the life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, won First Place in Historical Fiction in the Latino Literary Hall of Fame. *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005), won the Lambda Literary Foundation Award for Best Lesbian Novel and the Latino Book Award for Best English-Language Mystery. Library Journal called the book “an essential purchase for both mystery and Hispanic fiction collections.” Booklist also recommended it, saying “Gaspar de Alba not only crafts a suspenseful plot but tackles prejudice in many of its ugly forms: against gays, against Hispanics, against the poor. An in-your-face, no-holds-barred story full of brutality, graphic violence, and, ultimately, redemption.” Her most recent historical novel, *Calligraphy of the Witch*, was published by St. Martin’s Press in 2007. In 1994, *Mystery of Survival*, a collection of her short stories, was awarded the Premio Aztlán, a Rudolfo Anaya–endowed literary award for a first book of fiction by an emerging Chicana/o writer. Her novels have been translated into Spanish, German, Italian, and French, and her essays and short stories have been included in many anthologies.

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Recently, Gaspar de Alba edited two volumes on contemporary feminist issues, both of which were released in the 2010-2011 academic year. The first returns to the topic of the 2003 conference she organized on the maquiladora murders. *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera* (University of Texas Press, 2010), which Gaspar de Alba edited with help from her former graduate student, Georgina Guzmán, explores the “perfect storm” of factors that have led to these misogynistic crimes remaining unsolved. The essays consider globalization, exploitative working conditions, lack of concern from the U.S. companies that own the maquiladoras, and sexist attitudes in the discourse about the victims. Also discussed are the efforts of grassroots activist groups of Ciudad Juárez, including many mothers of the victims, to draw attention to the murders and to pressure Mexican law enforcement agencies into prioritizing their resolution. In a recent review on the website of the Wellesley Centers for Women, Margaret Randall described *Making a Killing* as “an intelligent yet passionate collection of essays” that “provides an in-depth understanding of the femicides.” She concludes by calling the volume “a powerful and important resource, one that should be read by everyone interested in exploring the many ways in which women are expendable in our societies and the undeclared war against women that rages—with U.S. complicity—along our southern border.”

The second new volume considers reactions to Alma López’s digital collage entitled “Our Lady,” which depicts, in the artist’s words, “an image of a forty year old woman with her belly and legs exposed standing on a black crescent moon held by a bare breasted female butterfly angel.” Gaspar de Alba coedited *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López’s “Irreverent Apparition”* (U of Texas Press, 2011) with López, who was a UC Regents Lecturer in Art History and Chicana/o Studies at UCLA in 2009. The title, layout, and details of the “Our Lady” artwork allude to traditional iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Protesters and supporters clashed fiercely over the piece during its first showing, at the “CyberArte: Tradition Meets Technology” exhibition that was curated by Dr. Tey Marianna Nunn at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2001. Including essays by Gaspar de Alba, López, Tey Marianna Nunn, Deena J. González, Luz Calvo, Emma Pérez, and others, the volume features a range of perspectives on definitions of art, artistic and religious expression, queer theory, and Chicano nationalism. Charlene Villaseñor Black, Associate Professor in the Department of Art History at UCLA, called it “an exceptionally important and powerful collection of essays, opening new interpretive paths and new tools for the activist-scholar-student.”
Professor Gaspar de Alba is married to Alma López, and they are one of the 18,000 legally wed gay and lesbian couples in California.

Recently, Gaspar de Alba kindly chatted with CSW Update about her career and recent volumes.

**CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES?**

I started writing at the age of nine, when I wrote and performed my first play in the fourth grade. At 13, while still in the eighth grade, I had my first piece of nonfiction published in New America Speaks. In high school I wrote editorials, feature articles, and reported on girls’ sports events for the school newspaper; I was also an associate editor of the school creative writing magazine. My formative experience as a creative writer came from the great writers I had the fortune of studying with at the University of Texas at El Paso, including the poets Leslie Ullman, Judith Root, and James Ragan, and the fiction writers Ray Carver and James Crumley. As a graduate student in the creative writing program there, I also had the privilege of meeting and being in the summer workshops of two amazing poets Tess Gallagher and Naomi Shihab Nye. After my M.A., I got a fellowship to pursue my Ph.D. in American Studies at the University of Iowa, where I only lasted one year. Whether because of the program or the weather in Iowa, I dropped out and went to live in Boston, Massachusetts, for four years, where I learned how to read Braille and worked at a Braille Press, and also taught part-time in the English department at University of Massachusetts. I returned to academia to complete my Ph.D. in American Studies in 1990 at the University of New Mexico, where I graduated with distinction in 1994. That same year, I was hired as one of the four founding faculty members of the then César Chávez Center for Interdisciplinary Instruction in Chicana and Chicano Studies at UCLA, and I’ve been here ever since.

**DOES YOUR CREATIVE WRITING AFFECT YOUR SCHOLARSHIP AND VICE VERSA?**

I think my scholarship and my creative writing have been mutually beneficial. As a graduate student completing a Ph.D. in American Studies at the University of New Mexico, my daily discipline as a creative writer came in very handy, especially when time came to write the dissertation. Although scholarly writing utilizes a different part of the brain than creative writing, the practice of sitting down to write and blocking everything else out helped me crank out my dissertation chapters in less than two years. Similarly, my experience as a researcher has greatly benefited my creative writing, particularly my historical novels and stories. The fact that I already had a B.A. and a M.A. in English before I started writing my novel on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz gave me the logistical know-how I needed to conduct a long-term research project and to work with archival resources. It took me ten...
I also made a promise to myself that I would try to keep my publications balanced between scholarly and creative. I think I’ve managed to do that in the ten books I’ve published so far: three novels, three anthologies, two collections of stories, one academic monograph, and one collection of poetry.

WHAT DREW YOU TO UCLA?
I was doing dissertation research on the “Chicano Art: Resistance and and Affirmation, 1965-1985” exhibition at the then Wight Art Gallery on campus. One night as I was leaving the gallery and walking back to Lot 3, I had a feeling, déjà vu or whatever, that I’d be working here one day. I had no idea the Hunger Strike would result in commitments from the administration to hire new faculty for a new and revitalized Chicana/o Studies program. The idea of helping Chicana/o Studies rise from the ashes of its previous incarnations at UCLA was very appealing, and so when the job openings became public, I applied, and here I am.

WHAT DOES FEMINISM MEAN TO YOU?
I teach feminism as the empowerment of women and the resistance to patriarchy. There were always very strong women in my family, my grandmother primary among them, who were never afraid to take risks. However, she had only a second-grade education and married very young, at 14, and raised six children as well as me. Despite her strength and determination, my grandmother had no feminist models, and she tried to inculcate in me the idea that I would one day be expected to run a household and have a traditional Mexican woman’s life. I don’t know when I knew for sure that I was a feminist, but by the time I got to high school, I had a clear idea in my mind that I was not going to grow up to serve men or have a family like my grandmother. I knew I liked to write and to study and, especially, to play sports. I had one very strong feminist mentor in high school, my English teacher, Ms. Bonnie Lesle, who insisted we call her Ms. Lesley not Miss or Mrs. I was on the high school newspaper staff, writing editorials that were single-mindedly focused on complaining about the lack of girls’ athletics at Eastwood High School. I think these editorials may have had something to do with why the administration decided to give girls’ athletics a try, and during my junior year, the Eastwood Troopers expanded to include girls’ basketball, volleyball, and track & field teams. I tried out for all of the teams, of course, and was a varsity player on all of them (though track & field was so not my sport). That same year, I received a commendation from the El Paso Women’s Political Caucus for my feminist activism in getting girls athletics started at Eastwood. It’s been a winning team ever since 1976. (In 2011, the Eastwood High School girls’ varsity basketball team won the gold medal in Division Two at the Pasadena Invitational.) As a senior, I made some more noise on the newspaper about the double standard of...
boys getting letter jackets but not girls and, lo and behold, the women athletes (I disdained to refer to us as “girl athletes”) got letter jackets. My first letter was in volleyball, and followed by one in basketball. I was also MVP in volleyball. That experience taught me that writing and activism were connected. I’ve never forgotten that.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE VOLUME ON THE MAQUILADORA MURDERS?
Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera was originally going to be a collection of proceedings from the 2003 international conference that I organized at UCLA on the murdered women of Juárez. As life would have it, however, many other things intervened, including the mystery novel I was writing about the crimes and published in 2005. Chairing the Chávez Department also intervened, so that I had little time between 2007 and 2010 to work on any of my book projects. Between 2003 and 2006, new research articles were published on the femicides by U.S. and Mexican scholars, and I realized that the book had to be much broader than a collection of conference proceedings. With the help of my then graduate assistant and advisee, Georgina Guzmán (a Ph.D. student in English), who worked with me between 2005 and 2010, we were able to compile an impressive collection of scholarly essays about the crimes as well as testimonios or personal reflection pieces written by two of the mothers of the victims to bear witness to their losses. The scholarly essays explore the social and cultural conditions that have led to this epidemic of violated and murdered women on the U.S.-Mexico border, studying the femicides from different perspectives and approaches, including feminism, critical race theory, Marxism, urban geography, and semiotics. Some also examine the various grassroots forms of activism that have arisen related to the crimes. The testimonios section also includes a reflection from a forensic psychologist and a visual artist that shed light on how U.S. academics and artists have worked to help bring attention to the crimes, and the cover features a piece by Alma López that is part of her own artistic response to the femicides.

HOW DID THE PROJECT ON OUR LADY OF CONTROVERSY ORIGINATE?
Alma López and I have been friends since 1999, but it wasn’t until a few years ago that we “saw” each other differently and fell in love. We got married in August 2008, in that very narrow window of opportunity between June 17 and November 4 of that year when it was legal for same-sex couples to marry in California. We are, therefore, one of the legally wed 18,000 gay and lesbian couples in California.

When the controversy around “Our Lady” happened in 2001, I was one of the many academics who wrote letters to the Museum of International Folk Art to demand that they not censor her work from the exhibition. I remember a conversation I had with Alma at the time about how I saw the protest as a “pilgrimage,” as it was drawing thousands of viewers to the Museum to witness the apparition of a new Our Lady of Guadalupe in Santa Fe. That idea never left me, and after Alma and I organized a panel about the Our Lady controversy for the 2007 National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies annual meeting, in which we saw how much interest there still was, seven years later, on the controversy and on “Our Lady,” we decided to put together a collection of essays looking back at what happened in Santa Fe and analyzing the controversy’s different permutations (censorship in the arts, an artist’s First Amendment rights, cultural vs. religious iconography, and so on). We actually sold the idea to University of Texas Press in 2008, before the manuscript had even materialized. In the ensuing year and a half, we invited several Chicana and Latina feminist scholars, as well as the curator of the show, to write essays for the collection taking whatever approach they wanted in their analysis of the controversy, and we included a couple of pieces that were written at the time of the controversy as well as original cartoons that had appeared in the local Santa Fe papers in 2001. For our own essays, Alma and I went to Santa Fe (part of our honeymoon) in the summer of 2008 to work in the Museum Archives and dig up as much as we could of the archival materials that neither of us had ever...
You can learn more about Gaspar de Alba’s work at http://www.aliciagaspardealba.net/. You can learn more about Alma López and her work at http://www.almalopez.com/. Both sites were designed by López. The Department of Women’s Studies at UCLA just bought a print of López’s entitled “Tattoo,” which is on display in the main office.

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WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

A YA (Young Adult) novel about gay teen bullying in high school and a young Chicana butch who has to contend with her family’s surprise quinceañera, or sweet 15 party, in which they hope to resocialize her into the “good Mexican girl” heterosexual construction of her gender. I’m also working on an academic book about the “frame” of the bad woman stereotype and how it’s been applied transculturally and transhistorically to different “bad girls” of Chicana/Mexicana history, including Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the murdered women of Juárez, and Chicana artists like Alma López, Yolanda López, and Ester Hernández.