Podcast with Alex Gillespie recorded February 10, 2017 transcribed

Alex Gillespie (AG): Increasingly my work is collaborative. I have space that I designate as lab space, both on the St. George campus, where a number of my graduate students are based, and here at UTM, where some of my graduate students spend some of their time, and where lots of my undergraduate researchers are.

So what are these people collaborating on?

Carla DeMarco (CD): Collaborations and lab space.

This sounds like it could be the words of a scientist or maybe a social-sciences researcher, who traditionally works in a lab and collaborates on a large research team, not the words of a humanities scholar whose expertise is in medieval studies and the history of the book, but that is precisely who this is.

[Theme music fade-in]

Professor Alexandra Gillespie is today's guest on our View to the U podcast, and she dispels some of the myths or the notions we might have of the insular humanities researcher toiling away solo within their own scholarly silo.

Instead she brings us a glimpse of the ways in which her research on the history of the book is forging new ground in the digital age, and how her team of collaborators is redefining research in the humanities.

[Theme music]

CD: Hello, and welcome to View to the U: An eye on UTM research.
I'm Carla DeMarco at U of T Mississauga.

View to the U is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines who will illuminate some of the inner-workings of the science labs and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM.

[Music fades out]

Alex Gillespie has been a prof in UTM's Department of English & Drama since 2004, and she is also currently serving as Chair of the department. She is a renowned scholar of the literary works of 14th-century writer Geoffrey Chaucer, and she specializes in medieval and early modern texts and books, with a focus on the shift from manuscript to print, the relationship between book history, literary criticism, and literary theory, and the digitization of medieval books.

As part of her unique research program, Alex oversees the Old Books New Science Lab, which brings together undergraduate research assistants, graduate

students, postdoctoral fellows, and technologists with interests in digital scholarship and digital text editing, computational approaches to humanities research and new media, medieval book history both in manuscript and print, and in medieval-literary studies.

Also, in relation to UTM's 50th anniversary and having worked on the campus for over a decade, Alex will speak to some of the changes she's observed at UTM during her time here, addressing the physical change to the campus, but also the ever expanding global nature and varied interests of its student population, and what she envisions for her department on the horizon.

CD: And what I mainly wanted to ask you today was to tell me a little bit about sort of a broad overview of your research program, and also I know you're merging into some new territory – so how does Chaucer fit in with gaming? If you could cover all of that, that would be great.

AG: All of the things that I do.

Well first of all, thanks very much for this chance to talk about my research. Like lots of professors I like nothing more, and as a Chair, I don't always get time to do so.

I'll start by saying that my research agenda or my research program has changed a lot in recent years. You mentioned that I'm moving into some new areas and I am but actually the way that I do my research has shifted as well. And, perhaps if I describe *how* I'm doing my research, it will explain the kind of research that I'm doing.

So humanities scholars traditionally are thought to work in the ivory tower; they sit in their garret, and they write books based on other great books, or at least that's the myth. Increasingly actually humanities research, or a number of humanities researchers are working in quite different ways, and I am one of those.

Increasingly my work is collaborative. I have space that I designate as lab space, both on the St. George campus, where a number of my graduate students are based, and here at UTM, where some of my graduate students spend some of their time, and where lots of my undergraduate researchers are.

So what are these people collaborating on?

First of all, some of what they're collaborating on is just a kind of intellectual conversation around the big questions that concern me. So actually traditional humanities scholarship but done in this slightly more dynamic way. The big questions that concern me right now are the relationship between the study of the history of the book, which is the field that I work on, medieval manuscripts, and the field of humanities or arts research.

There's a way in which the study of the history of the book sits at the very *edge* of humanities research; it's quite an empirical discipline. We do things, people who are historians of the book, who study old manuscripts and the way they were made, do things like count pages, and measure the dirt level on bindings, or work out that a particular board that's used in a binding is beech, not oak, and, questions like that, which sounds a little bit more like science or perhaps like archaeology. And that kind of work yields a body of really interesting empirical information, but in literary studies, which is where I work, with *my guy*, Geoffrey Chaucer, the author of *The Canterbury Tales* – and if listeners haven't read *The Canterbury Tales*, that's something they should put to the top of their reading list, it's *amazing* stuff.

How does that, how does working on the poetry of this really major and fascinating late medieval poet – what's the relationship between work on *that*, which tends to be qualitative and analytical and theoretical and aesthetic, those are the kinds of judgments in the forms of inquiry that I'm engaged in – how does that relate to these piles of empirical data that I produce when I work on manuscripts? And one of the ways that I am trying to answer that question is through a monograph called *Chaucer's Books*, and I'm actually interested in the way that Chaucer *himself* represents this as a problem because Chaucer, as a writer, is really interested in different modes of cognition, and that's a question for his period, for his age, for the universities, which are reasonably new in the 14th century in England, for scholars who are based at those universities.

How do people come to know things? What are the different way people know things? Chaucer's sort of ofay with this kind of research, and he's exploring it in his own writing. And the contrast that *he's* interested in is a little bit like the contrast I just described: it's the difference between knowledge that we come to by *thinking* about things, by reading things, through rational inquiry, through argument, through debate, through higher level thought, and the knowledge that we come to through observation, perception, experience, touch, those kinds of things. So *he's* interested in that very question, and I think that that same question is actually inflicting the different ways that my colleagues and I do research on the Middle Ages.

So that's what my book's about, it's a very roundabout description. How does my collaborative team, you know, help with that? Well lots of my graduate students are working on adjacent questions. I have graduate students working, for example, on the relationship between cognitive science and manuscript studies including the use of, for example, MRI machines and the study of aesthetics. I have students who are working on the idea of wonder in Chaucer's writing, so much more traditional sort of way of thinking about Chaucer's writing, asking this abstract question, '*what* is wonder?' in Chaucer's literature. And I have students who are thinking about manuscripts, who are really interested in going into the archive and figuring out how books were made; I have lots of students who are doing that, too, about how medieval books were made, and what they can tell us about the past.

So they're my interlocutors. I meet with them once a week, at least, if not more often, and we talk about their research and we talk about mine. And a lot of them work for me as RAs, helping me with my research. *But* the coming together around these questions – *and* the fact that I'm interested in the history of the book I think – has also led me in, as you said, some other different and newer directions.

Once you've got a lab, you start to maybe think slightly differently or perhaps it was that I started thinking slightly differently and developed a lab. As a manuscript scholar I'm inevitably working a little bit in the digital space, and that's because I live in Canada, and most of the books that I work on are not in Canada. They're in Europe or they're in the United Kingdom, sometimes they're in the United States. I can go and visit them, and I do, and that's great, and I touch them and I come to know them through those kinds of observational methods, but we're also seeing a lot of those books being put online, being digitized.

So I've been involved in that endeavour and thinking about what it means for scholarship for well over a decade, but increasingly, and as I said, partly because I realized that I had this really amazing community around me of very interesting, smart students and postdocs and colleagues, the question was 'what can we at UofT contribute, in a slightly larger way, to this big question of what does it mean to put all this cultural heritage material up on line?' A lot of its never been printed – the texts might've been printed – but the particular, unique instantiations of those texts and these handmade medieval manuscripts – they've kind of skipped the whole print era, but now they're appearing online. How is that going to transform scholarship? How will it transform thought? Once we've turned manuscripts into image data, which is what we're doing instead of distributing it digitally, how does that change these cognitive and epistemological questions that actually interest me?

So, in addition to writing a monograph about Chaucer, I'm also running quite a substantial project in software development. It's a project called "Digital Tools for Manuscript Study." It's collaborative, not just with all the wonderful students and postdocs that I have, but also I have a co-PI [Principal Investigator] in Sian Meikle, who's the Director of Information Technology Services for University of Toronto Libraries. And she and I employ together a number of developers, librarians, project managers, who work on building scholarly tools that make it easier to work online with medieval manuscripts, and then reflecting on what that means and what it might mean moving into the future. How we as a field – we, manuscript studies, manuscript scholars as a group – might shift and change our ways of working in response to new technologies. And how can new technologies become more responsive to what it is that's really core to what we do? So we're building annotation tools, we're building viewing tools, and we're, above all, looking to make those tools work interoperably with all sorts of different kinds of archives.

So as a scholar I can sit in Canada and pull an image from a manuscript in the Vatican, but also a manuscript in the British Library, for example. That sounds like a

really simple thing; actually it's *not* a simple thing. And it's very fun to be involved in trying to develop the technologies that will make that possible.

CD: Now, as a book lover myself, all this talk about digitization and a turn to new technologies, has me a bit worried about the fate of the physical book, and so I ask Alex, based on her expertise on the history of the book, but also the current work she is doing in the digital age, if she foresees a future without the physical book.

AG: I foresee a future in which there are fewer of them but I don't think that we have quite worked out what it is about haptics, the science of touch, and the three dimensionality of the book that makes it so much more attractive to some people as a way to consume textual information than the screen. And, obviously, there's a lot of work on that question, and there's a lot of development that's gone on in the private sector around that question – hence we have Kindles, which are not screens in the same way that our Mac Books, for example, are screens.

But a lot of people will say, and I would be one of those, I really don't, at the end of the day I don't want to pick up a screen. I love my screens, I love the digital world, I'm very, very committed to it, I work within it. I am not a Luddite by any stretch, but there's something really important to me about picking up a book from beside my bed at least once a day and reading off the page. And I'd also point out that anybody who's had small children and taught them to read, or has read with them in any way, well perhaps not anyone, but pretty much everyone *I* know, will attest that a child is very differently interested from information that they get on a screen from the kind of information they get in a book. And, as I say, I think it's to do with touch, and to do with dimensionality, with the arrangement of ideas and space, spatiality. And there is work that's gone on here, mostly in cognitive science, but I think until computer technologies are able to replicate that experience, they won't be replaced. There will be a core group of people who want to read off the page, and there will be a *need* at a *younger* age, cognitively, for people to learn to do that. But that's really important, just as handwriting is really important, and increasingly work, research in cognitive science seems to suggest there are real cognitive benefits to the act of writing by hand as opposed to touching a letter that then becomes that letter on the screen.

CD: Where you're using both sides of your brain.

AG: Something like that. And, you know, again, these are questions in their infancy, but I don't think until – I think there's still a *long* time to go before we really lose the book.

We're selling more books – *we're* selling? They are selling. At least about six years ago, last time I looked at the statistics, it was said that publishers were selling more books than ever, not fewer books in this digital environment, and more *physical* books, partly because new technologies have made those books actually cheaper relative to overall income, so new technologies and globalization, I should say. So I don't think in our lifetimes we'll see the book disappear.

CD: And I can't help but think, too, I remember interviewing you many years ago now, probably in 2007, but I remember you talking about when you were looking through Chaucer's manuscript, I think you said you found the notations from John Stowe or something in the margins, and, you know, you don't have the physical book, you don't have that kind of…

AG: Well, there's no question that the history of the book will remain embedded in the objects, the ones that are held by archives. They may be digitized but they're still going to yield information to physical examination that they don't yield in two-dimensional, digital form.

One of the things that we're working on, is to work with a number of local Toronto museums and galleries and libraries and some scientists at Sheridan and Western, and associated with the Canadian Film Centre, on how to use 3D modeling to think about the book in a digital space in different ways; to think about old books, that is. But it's still the case that those objects had a huge amount to say; they have a lot to speak to us about, about the past. It might be an annotation, it might be, as I said, that the board is made out of beech and not oak, but there are still things for us to ask and learn from them.

CD: And this also is probably something that you've already touched on, but I know last year I saw you speak at the Digital Humanities Network that was held in part here at UTM in August, and you talked about the tools that the humanities people need in this, you called it a "data deluge." But you also talked about the need for humanities people to have what you called "humanities hubs," which I've actually taken that term and put it in the intro of my podcast because I thought it was very interesting that you were talking about the need for lab space but for a humanities person it's not necessarily "lab" space that you have in the sciences, but as a place for debate and discussion, and I just wondered if you could just talk about that briefly.

AG: Yeah, well I think I have touched on it a bit, when I talked about the way that that emerged in the arrangement I made for the researchers who work with me as graduate students, postdocs and employees, and that what we found, it grew organically to some extent. There was a space we were able to use, and we were running quite a lot of small collaborative projects at that point, we came together and found that. And I was really interested in creating an environment in which I could talk to students about my work and they could talk to me about their work that was much more dynamic than the one-on-one, professor and student supervisory relationship. I felt like I wanted a *little bit* actually to replicate what I could achieve in my undergraduate classroom as a researcher, which was to go in and take ideas, and treat the classroom like a laboratory and test out ideas and see if they worked.

In a way, what I have ended up doing is flipping *that* analogy. It's turning what you might call a laboratory kind of research space into a classroom. So understanding – and I'm sure that scientists would agree that's what they're doing as well – that the space at the lab is one in which you are asking questions and trying to find answers as part of a community, and understanding the advancement of knowledge as always being one that involves conversation, and conversation with other people who care about that question. But I do feel that because I am unusual as a humanist researcher and depending as heavily as I do on the results of empirical enquiry, it's still the case that as a domain the humanities, its big questions actually, they're just frankly too hard to answer with piles of empirical data. You know, what is beauty? What is the meaning of life? How does reference work? Why religion? Why did that happen? Those sorts of questions. You're not going to answer those by compiling spreadsheets. You've got to think really, really hard. You've got to think in other disciplines as well, but we don't have that *need*, and to the same extent, in many cases, to have a space where we can produce kinds of data. We may *have* data, and it may be digital and so on, but what we really need is a space to think about what that *means*, what we should do with that data.

And that's where I think the humanities has a real role in the context of the data deluge, which is the data deluge suddenly presents us with opportunities to ask all kinds of new questions, but also to come up against the limits of what we can do with data. Suddenly it's not the case that we can't find out about climate change because we don't have enough data. On the contrary, we have *so* much data, and people are pretty sure that we know what climate change is, and what causes it – well, they're *sure*, not pretty sure, they're sure – and yet we can't persuade half the population. So in *that* kind of a circumstance, you need people who are asking different kinds of questions, or asking the questions in different ways, who know about narrative, who know about human-value systems, who know about the epistemological modes of the ordinary person, and so on. So I think we do need new kinds of space, but I think the humanities also has a lot to contribute in this changing research environment.

CD: And I think that ties into my next question about what do you feel is the biggest impact of your work?

AG: Um, probably, it's two fold. People who work in Chaucer studies: they read my work. Not all of them, of course. But some of them do. So people who work on Chaucer care about what I think about Chaucer, some of them. And I have an impact in that way, and that *matters* to me because I care about the past, and I care about beautiful literature. And I think it presents us with questions that we have yet to answer, and it's fun to be a part of trying to figure that out.

But I think probably, and increasingly, and this is newer, perhaps the biggest impact I have, and this is both at UofT – probably *more* at UofT than anywhere else – but I hope it might extend beyond UofT in some way, and that is modeling a *more* flexible way of doing research as a scholar in medieval studies or literature or just the

humanities broadly. And I want to be *clear* since I think it's an important thing to say, the traditional mode of the humanists sitting in their garret writing their book about a book, with a pencil, that is still incredibly valuable precisely because some of these questions are the kind of questions you *cannot* answer in any other way except by thinking really, really hard. And that's what I mean by flexible: I still do that; that's still part of my research life, too, but I've gained so much personally, and I feel that the community I work in has also benefitted from mixing that up a little bit, from bringing undergraduates into different spaces, from trying different kinds of projects as a humanist researcher and seeing how one's thinking changes when you enter a different domain and follow a different set of disciplinary or technical requirements. You know, when I am managing a software-development project, I have to think in a different way from when I'm writing a close reading of a Chaucer poem, but actually that pushes my way of thinking in two different directions, which I find really complementary. I find that I learn because of the contrast and because of the similarities, I can see between these different ways of thinking. That's part of how I learn. So I hope that some of the impact my work has, as I say, modeling different ways of doing this quite traditional work that I do.

[18:50 Interlude music]

CD: Coming up: Alex talks about the changing face of UTM, both in terms of its aesthetics and architecture but also the growth of the global nature of the campus and evolving student community.

CD: So my last question, and again this ties in with UTM's 50th. I know you've been on the campus for, I guess it's going on 13 years, what sort of changes have you seen at UTM since you've been here, but also, in terms of your department and the campus, where do you see it going in the future?

AG: So, some of the changes have been physical, and, you'll know this as well, when I arrived in 2004, English was housed in the North Building, which wasn't the finest piece of architecture in Ontario. And, indeed, there were many other structures at UTM that weren't ideal for what we were trying to do, which was grow what was a very small campus at that point into the juggernaut it is today. So, one of the things that's changed is my physical environment has become both much more suited to what it is we're trying to do, whether that's teaching or research, or being a part of an academic community, but it's also become so much more beautiful. It makes me happy when I come every single day. It was always beautiful because we always had the forest and the deer, but now we have these gorgeous buildings to go *with* the forest and the deer. And it's amazing. It tells you that that fact of how happy I am whenever I arrive on campus and just *look* at it, tells you how important aesthetics, and design and space and community are to the way that we work, and to ideas, and so on. So that's been fun to realize and great to be a part of.

I've also seen the demographics of this university change. I remember when I arrived, I was like, 'wow, this place is so "diverse."' Diversity has lots of meanings,

and sometimes it gets used in a kind of woolly way to kind of excuse things that are more complicated. Excuse things? Explain away things that are more complicated. *But* it was very striking to me that my classroom would be *full* of students who either they or their parents came from *such* a wide number of different countries. It has become *even more* like that in the time, and I didn't even think that was possible. I remember asking my *first* literature class to tell me all the different countries their parents came from; that was the question. And we got up to about 25 in a class of about 45, and I thought 'wow, that's amazing. How could it be more diverse?' It is now *more* diverse. This is an amazing place. You really feel like you're in a *global* city, a big global city because Mississauga is a smaller part of a bigger metropolitan area, but that metropolitan area is so dynamically international, and yet at the same time so Canadian, so representative of the ethos of multiculturalism. And so that's been fantastic to be a part of and see happen.

And the last thing I'd say is that there's no question that students have changed a bit. Well, not just a bit, they've changed a lot; not as human beings but in terms of the experience they've had as learners, thinkers, and certainly as readers. There's so many different media now competing for their attention. It used to be all kids, they just watch TV, but now think about what they do, I mean all the different options they've got, whether it's playing *Pokémon Go* or living in online chat rooms – well they're not even online chat rooms anymore – living in Reddit, or playing computer games, or reading books, or listening to the radio, or some of those now, seemingly, traditional ways of consuming and of getting knowledge. And in an English literature department where we depend on people sitting down and reading big novels and so on, that presents kinds of challenges. I think it actually makes the work that we do perhaps *more* important because I think that knowing that there are other ways of consuming information that, yeah, for centuries sitting down and reading a book was how you found things out is a very important thing for people to know and for us to think about.

But we're also interested in the English Department, and I'm particularly interested partly because of my interests in the digital world, to describe it broadly; we're really interested in thinking about what it means to teach literature in a changing environment for new media. So, you mentioned at the beginning 'what does Chaucer got to do with gaming?' Well we have plans for undergraduate-research activity and teaching and areas that can connect literature to other kinds of immersive media narrative environments, including games, and that will include connecting Chaucer to gaming.

What does Chaucer have to do with gaming? Well, I could answer that in a number of ways. One way is that all of Chaucer's poems are constructed as *kinds* of games, or they're narrated as visionary imaginative experiences, so as you read them you feel like you're travelling through a virtual space; so you experience them a little bit like you would experience a game. But the *Canterbury Tales* is actually constructed as a game. It's a storytelling competition and a journey, and so there's that.

There's also the fact that the world of gaming, and other *kinds* of immersive media, we often point back to its origins and kinds of fantasy literature, which are really *parts* of this world. Fantasy literature that is usually thought to have been born in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, he was a scholar of late Middle English and Anglo-Saxon literature, he was a reader of Chaucer and of Chaucer's contemporaries and predecessors, and *a lot* of what he developed and this fantastical world that he developed, emerged out of the English literature traditions he studied.

And finally I would say that, um, our students don't see always the clear distinctions between – well, they understand reading a book is different from playing a game – but they don't necessarily understand that one is *better* than the other. They're incredibly interested intellectually in what it means to play *Pokémon Go* or collect books in Skyrim, which is a game in which you can collect books. They want to talk about those things, and they want to talk about them in the same way that they talk about literature even if they have an awareness that it isn't literature in the same way. And so as a department we're excited about providing spaces in which they can do that. We have courses on the books now in digital texts, and fan fiction, and video gaming, and we may move further in that direction or we might not.

A couple of other things we're doing is 1) we're putting more courses on the books that focus on the different communities that are part of Mississauga, more courses broadly in the area of critical race studies, colonialism and post-colonialism, indigenous literatures, multicultural literatures, queer writing, transgender studies, feminism, and so on. So thinking about this diverse community and what it means to read literature in it. So we're doing that.

And the *last* thing we're doing, and I think this matters, too, is increasingly our students are creators of narrative and of art, as well as consumers of it. One of the things digital technologies has made possible: it's now possible for a young person to sit down and make a film in a way that it just wasn't when I was a child. Or to make fan art about One Direction that's actually incredibly interesting. And so we are also moving in the direction of offering more opportunities for creative writing as one of the *kinds* of places in which you can be a maker, be a creator, and use that as a different way of thinking about literature. Not because we think all of our students are going to be novelists; some of them will be, which is cool. But more because creativity and making are modes of knowing and that takes me full circle back to my research interests. That's what I care about. I care about the way that human beings try to know things and quite often fail a little bit but we don't always come to certainty, but we try lots of different ways in the English Department and we try and reflect more of those different ways.

CD: It's amazing. And you totally make me feel like going back to school.

AG: That's good. That's what we're trying to do. More bums on seats. That's our goal. We welcome students who are coming for a victory lap as it were.

CD: Okay. I think that that pretty much covers it, and I just wanted to thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me about your work. It sounds like amazing things going on in English and Drama, and I really appreciate it.

AG: It was really fun, as I said, to talk about it. I wish I had more opportunities. It's what I love. So thanks

 [Wrap-up music]

CD: I would like to thank everyone for listening to today's show. I would like to thank my guest, Alex Gillespie, for talking about her work and the exciting things going on in her field and at UTM.

Thanks to Office of the Vice-Principal, Research for their support. Thank you to everyone who has been helping to promote this podcast.

Special thanks to Tim Lane for his audio assistance, his technical perfectionism, and his music, music, music.

Thank you.