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Review of Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections

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Laura Uglean Jackson. *Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

Building on the procedures and principles set forth in the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning*, this volume of case studies edited by Laura Uglean Jackson provides ample instruction and examples from a variety of practitioners focused on these often neglected components of archival collection management. Jackson, a self-proclaimed “unrepentant reappraiser’ (and deaccessioner)” (vii), brings together the perspectives of archivists who have pursued reappraisal and deaccessioning in institutions of different sizes and types, with various constraints on time and resources, and with varying levels of stakeholder buy-in.

Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections is the first book dedicated entirely to deaccessioning, and the first compilation of reappraisal and deaccessioning case studies “demonstrating the utility and applicability” (x) of the Society of American Archivists' *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning*. Positioning these case studies within the scaffolding of the *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning* was intentional. Jackson herself was part of the first and second iterations of the guidelines, working from 2009 to 2017 to distill a set of universal principles and practical steps for reappraisal and deaccessioning for American archivists. Jackson's work experience (including conducting a major National Historical Publications and Records Commission-funded backlog reappraisal and deaccessioning project under the leadership of Mark Greene at the American Heritage Center) supplements the credentials of the editor: she has walked the walk.

In early 2018, Jackson put out a call for chapter proposals with the goal of accumulating case studies, perspectives, and discussions. This open call resulted in the selection of a complex assortment of final contributions representing institutions large and small; academic, public, and private; and at varying levels of government. Overall, Jackson asks her contributors to consider the questions we must ask when making decisions to remove material via “real-world scenarios” and “models for addressing some of the questions, challenges, and issues encountered” during deaccessioning (x). Jackson frames the book around these questions, as well as an acknowledgment that deaccessioning and reappraisal decision-making is inherently subjective.

The book is comprised of thirteen contributor chapters, all of which are case studies from specific institutions. Chapters 1 through 5 and 10 through 13 focus on academic archival environments; chapters 6 through 8 represent the government/municipal perspective; and chapter 9 is from the viewpoint of a religious archives in New Zealand. Several (but not all) chapters include figures and appendices depicting workflows, criteria, and form templates. With the exception of chapter 9 (Marist Archives, Wellington, New Zealand) and chapter 6 (Archives of Ontario, Canada), the case studies come from a broad American geographical context, including California, Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and North Carolina. The chapters follow the general structure and flow of a case study: many include background information about the repository and collection(s), some include a literature review, all have an outline of the problem/question, and all have either a conclusion or summary of future actions. The order of the case studies is generally sufficient to connect the themes from chapter to chapter. However varied the structure or voice of these chapters may be, the editor has ensured

that the majority of the chapter titles provide some context clues for the institution type and/or issue(s) being addressed.

Marcella Huggard's "Good Intentions: Distinguishing Deaccessioning from Weeding" (chapter 1) clarifies that weeding is not the same intellectually rigorous, sometimes longer-term process as deaccessioning. In making this distinction, Huggard primes the reader to begin thinking about what materials might be relatively easy to assess for potential removal or destruction via weeding, beginning the work that leads to a thoughtful deaccessioning process. The next four chapters (chapters 2–5) illustrate three scenarios in which deaccessioning was initiated in the academic archival context due to practical pressures of limited space and resources. At the University of Southern California, Steve Hanson and Sue Luftschein (chapter 2) found they needed to develop principles for deaccessioning in order to justify retention of material that might otherwise be removed or destroyed due to the loss of an offsite storage facility. At the University of Florida (UF) and a UF annex operation in St. Augustine, Florida, a group of collection managers and archivists (John Nemmers, Matthew Armstrong, Elizabeth Bouton, Kristin Conwill, and Lourdes Santamaria-Wheeler) observed limited intellectual control among hybrid collections, leading to a joint reappraisal and deaccessioning project (chapter 3). At the University of California, Los Angeles, project archivist Katharine Lawrie (chapter 4) conducted a comprehensive reappraisal project prompted by the anticipated capacity limit of a regional library storage facility, while Cliff Hight at Kansas State University (chapter 5) reappraised a records collection made up of many accruals over time, setting up a workflow to increase access for future accruals (and future reappraisal).

Chapter 6 provides background and practical exploration of deaccessioning in the provincial archives of Ontario, Canada, including unique approaches to facilitating decentralized access and repatriation of local history collections offered to the Archives of Ontario. In the case of Ontario, authors Emily Chicorli, Aaron Hope, and Sean Smith identify long-term loans as well as digitization and exhibition loans as means to navigate complex governmental structures and highlight local collections in ways that are focused on "improving access, supporting local and regional history and research, and ensuring the long-term preservation of records" (80). By comparison, in chapter 7, Kelly Policelli and Carie Chesarino map out a comprehensive approach to reappraisal in the state archives of North Carolina over five years using a combination of macro-level functional review of government records scheduling and series-level reappraisal based on a framework and clear set of criteria. This tightly managed reappraisal workflow is far more technical than Ontario's, but provides a helpful contrast that demonstrates varying approaches to thoughtful consideration of records backlogs in the governmental setting.

The addition of Todd Gilbert and Rachel Greer's contribution (chapter 8) on the New York City Municipal Archives adds an American view of regional archives that is arguably more familiar for the reader who may be dealing with the very beginning stages of forming reappraisal criteria with limited staffing, "broken" processes, and confusion dealing with the decisions of one's predecessors. Likewise, chapter 9 provides a balanced discussion of both general practice and a specific, regional example of deaccessioning in New Zealand. Elizabeth Charlton shares reconfiguration decision-making templates for retrospective appraisal ("appraisal of collections or items where evidence of previous appraisal to an approved standard is not apparent") in a small, private archival repository (134).

Chapters 10 through 13 again center on academic archives; however, these final chapters represent an aspirational component of reappraisal and deaccessioning: transferring material of value to a more appropriate institution (or back to the donor). Adriana Cuervo in chapter 10 laments the failure of an ethical approach to acquisitions in a jazz archives, where deaccessioning resulted from a donor's disappointment with unwritten promises made through a "handshake" or "gentleman's" agreement. Ruth E. Bryan in chapter 11 describes a negotiation with a living donor's adult son that resulted in deaccessioning. At first, Bryan's institution stayed in line with existing policy and straightforward documentation of custody; later, it became apparent that the request for deaccessioning was based more on personal ties and warranted further review.

As Jackson notes, transfer to a more appropriate repository is the "most favorable outcome" for deaccessioning, highlighted in the SAA guidelines (xii). Chapters 12 and 13 provide two case studies with happy endings. Vincent J. Novara in chapter 12 discusses the identification of a high-value collection that had the unhappy coincidence of being in his repository, while other components were held at another university. Novara, thwarted in his early efforts to transfer the collection, waited for changes in library leadership and was successful in uniting material via deaccessioning and transfer. Dylan McDonald and Julie Thomas in chapter 13 describe a collaboration to deaccession and unify an important regional history audiovisual collection. They include some suggestions for how a receiving institution can support such deaccession-based transfers/donations.

No book on deaccessioning could cover every possible scenario, which may be why there has never been a volume such as *Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections*. While archival studies literature has long been fascinated by appraisal, there are precious few analyses of the aftermath of the appraisal decision (or lack thereof). The better-known, landmark pieces of literature (Leonard Rapport, Karen Benedict) are cited by the editor and throughout the text. A few chapters make direct reference to the SAA guidelines; however, these case studies are decisively individualized, demonstrating that there is still plenty of room for further implementation of the guidelines developed by the Society of American Archivists. This book is certainly a solid resource for practicing professional archivists unsure of how to pilot or lead reappraisal and deaccessioning in their own workplaces, and is a useful and handy supplement to the SAA guidelines.

This book provides the reader with a path for navigating the inevitable challenges of deaccessioning. This work is often absent in the evangelization of iterative, extensible collection management practice. Who or what will help the archivist who asks, "why do we have this?" or "why isn't this somewhere else?" A longer edition of this book might feature Jackson expounding on the SAA guidelines, her general philosophy, or a brief historical analysis of reappraisal and deaccessioning, and a closing chapter that reinforces the book's goal to instill confidence in the archivist in taking a critical eye to what is already there.

Moreover, Jackson's mention of the subjectivity of reappraisal and deaccessioning work is a significant point that deserves more attention from the editor, who has herself navigated the personalized, sometimes forgotten decisions of archivists past. While a case study might not be

able to address this, a concluding section or chapter might serve to pull core concepts together with emerging practice; for example, how good reappraisal and deaccessioning serves the aims of the revised Principles for Archival Description in *Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACs)*. Jackson's book could perhaps form the basis of future writing on diversity, equity, and inclusion in archival reappraisal and deaccessioning, in pursuit of an actionable reckoning with the patriarchal, heteronormative, racist, and otherwise problematic collecting and descriptive practices of our predecessors.

As archivists strive for equitable access to all of our holdings, one thing we can do is document the criteria and results of our decision-making and leave that behind for future archivists to critique. The revised *DACS* principles may not have been available by the time this book was printed, but Jackson has, over the past few years of her work, identified something significant and crucial about archival practice: good collection management necessitates a commitment to critically reappraising and actively deaccessioning our collections. As she puts it, deaccessioning and reappraisal are "healthy, necessary, positive, and inspirational" (xii).