

# Book Review

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**Ana Schwartz, *Unmoored: The Search for Sincerity in Colonial America*, Williamsburg, VA: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023.**

As a professor of early American literature, I often find myself guiding students through some portion of Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous 1841 essay "Self-Reliance." In my survey classes, Emerson comes after students have waded through the Puritans' stringent sermons and attempted to follow the mercurial frolicking of Benjamin Franklin. By the time we make it to Emerson, my students are drawn to his enticingly modern admonition that they should "believe [their] own thought[s]" (Emerson 2003: 117) and his subsequent call to "trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string" (118). Though Emerson's text is nearly two hundred years old, its message still resonates. In her new book *Unmoored: The Search for Sincerity in Colonial America*, literary historian Ana Schwartz provides a well-researched and insightful analysis of the persistent American aspiration to "know ourselves." By closely reading several seventeenth-century, colonial New England texts, Schwartz illustrates that Emerson's quest for self-knowledge was not original to the nineteenth-century but was also a preoccupation of his colonial forebears who, like Emerson, believed that "sincerity could purchase stability, happiness, and fulfillment" (2).

Over a series of five chapters that cover the 1620s through the 1670s, Schwartz carefully contextualizes the "figurative ascent" of sincerity at the same time as she points out the irony inherent in that quest (3). The "powerful legacy of sincerity," she writes, is that "it promises confidence that one's desires can thoroughly,

consciously be known” and that “those desires can extricate themselves from the historical tangle of forces that generate them, from the strategies that shape them, and from the material practices that inflect their execution and reception” (255–56). In part because of the Puritan obsession with public confession, and in part because of their voluntary displacement, the texts of colonial New England are an apt location to observe sincerity’s development. The condition of being “unmoored” heightened the colonists’ desire for community and stability—a desire they attempted to fulfill through narrative. “Through practices of talking, settlers eventually brought into being a relatively new sort of colony—one not interested so much in acquisition or extraction but in re-creating normalcy and a sense of home. . . . They recorded this discourse because talk—specifically talk about themselves—was vital to achieving normalcy” (4).

Schwartz’s focus on sincerity in the colonial context puts *Unmoored* in direct conversation with Abram Van Engen’s *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early America* (2015). Both analyses provide a much-needed corrective to prevailing stereotypes of the dour, repressed, and unfeeling New England Puritan, and both take colonial unsettlement as their starting point. Yet Schwartz and Van Engen present quite different perspectives on sentiment’s role. For Van Engen, sympathy offers a pathway by which to understand Puritan bonds of affection. As he notes, colonial English Puritans narrated their interior selves and their dependence on one another, what he terms “fellow feeling,” as a way to define “the very boundaries of belonging” (Van Engen 2015: 4). Despite its performative rigors, sympathetic identification among the Puritans produced a “tight-knit society of saints” that “felt together—both by matching each other’s emotions (rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep) and by responding in the same way to the same events (all fasting for Parliament or giving thanks for the banishment of heretics). A unified community meant a single affection spread equally to all” (4).

While Van Engen points to sympathy’s potential to unify, Schwartz places more emphasis on its divisiveness by examining the alienating repercussions of the colonists’ attempts to know themselves and publicly make themselves known. As she writes in a beautifully crafted opening line, “Sincerity is the protagonist of the book: history, its antagonist. The following five chapters tell a story of the former’s struggle to forget the latter” (1). Schwartz turns to Foucault’s concept of biopoetics to help explain the function of colonial self-narratives. Guided by their sacred texts, the settlers developed “ways of living that could

be approached through highly formal practices of thought, inquiry and speech” (13). The colonies, she writes, “aren’t special to a new story of biopower simply because they were colonies. They are special because they were built by people whose unusual commitment to an old text put them, they thought, at the leading edge of social thought and political philosophy” (14). Colonial biopoetics, she explains, solidified settlers’ attempts to “not simply be in a place but, eventually, to be of it, too” (22).

One of the payoffs of Schwartz’s framework is that it allows her to examine the logics by which colonists both unconsciously and deliberately displaced Indigenous people. By narrating themselves into colonial New England, settlers also conveniently narrated Indigenous people out. Placing biopoetics and settler colonialism in conversation with one another, Schwartz works to “refram[e] the relationship that sincerity sustains with the violence it is often thought to redeem or negate.” It was their shared belief in a future utopia that fueled the colonists through the “dystopian, often apocalyptic consequences they obstinately mis-recognized everywhere around them and the strategies their non-English neighbors developed for surviving the apocalypse” (23). Schwartz’s approach not only reframes English settler motivation, it also helps illuminate the strategies that Indigenous people used in their response to settler sincerity.

This is most effectively done in chapter 2, “Dreaming on Dry Land: Thoughtfulness beyond Good Intentions.” Using Winthrop’s political sermon “Modell of Christian Charity” as a guide, Schwartz compares Winthrop’s ideal community with that advocated by the Algonquian leader Chickatawbut. As she observes, Winthrop’s sermon advanced a contemporary European belief in the hierarchy between reason and affection. As she explains, “English people presumed that to be human was to be unendingly vulnerable to feelings, unendingly vulnerable to affection, unendingly susceptible and sensitive to the material world” (86). The only bulwark against these threats was a strict reliance upon reason. Algonquian people understand their place in the world differently. Their responses to change were premised on a network of relationship, a relational approach, which Schwartz terms “thoughtfulness.” Driven by “its consistent vision of a network of relations,” thoughtfulness took susceptibility to outside ties, including those with the nonhuman, as a virtue rather than a source of fear. As Schwartz writes, “Thoughtfulness was a strategic response to earnest but insufficiently rational acts of depletion of a shared world” (86). Through careful attention to colonial texts, early modern scientific theory, and Algonquian oral narratives, Schwartz’s

chapter centers sincerity in order not only to creatively illustrate the limits of settler sympathy but to also shed a light on alternative ways of knowing that existed within colonial space.

Schwartz is not only interested in examining alternative modes of relation such as those found among Indigenous communities but also spends substantial time explicating the writing of English authors who found themselves chafing under the weight of sincerity's expectations. *Unmoored* opens and closes with examples of colonial women who refuse the public performance of sincerity that society required of them. The book begins with the story of Ann Eaton, a wealthy Englishwoman who, when censured by the colonial magistrates for not attending church meetings, declined to defend herself, and instead remained silent. Eaton assessed the situation and, like Bartleby, the Scrivener, determines that she would "prefer not to." Silence, as Schwartz notes, was "one plausible response among others to sincerity's reduction to the tiresome task of talking about oneself and to the shared and usually unchallenged premise that this tiresome talk was worth the effort" (2). In a thoughtful conclusion, Schwartz tells the tale of Ann Needham Hett, who is known from her inclusion in Winthrop's journals. The colonial governor was fascinated by Hett's attempts to twice drown her child in what Winthrop believed was a quest for spiritual certainty—to know for sure that she was damned. In Hett, Schwartz finds a woman who is not merely a Puritan anomaly but who has been worn down by the demands sincerity has made upon her. As Schwartz suggests, Hett may have found the labor of reproducing sincerity "unrelenting" and as such, she made choices that seemed unthinkable to those around her and that have continued to puzzle readers today (252).

Others whom Schwartz explores in detail include the minister's wife Mary Rowlandson and the self-scrutinizing poet Michael Wigglesworth. Schwartz points out that both Rowlandson's and Wigglesworth's writings wrestle with fear of social exclusion. As such, both authors were more finely attuned to the demands that sincerity required of those wanting to comfortably claim a place in the community. Wigglesworth's anxieties derived from his inability to control his body—a necessary requirement for proper performances of masculinity. Rowlandson's worries arose out of the constant need for her to perform the role of captive in order to maintain the networks she created in the aftermath of her capture. In a touching chapter on friendship, Schwartz uses Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* to explore the unique expectations for sincerity associated with nonfamilial relationship. As she writes, "friendship

required [settlers] to persuade others—and maybe, for the sake of convenience, themselves—that they possessed sincerity, that they possessed a commitment to personal truth through time” (204). While friendship after captivity was difficult for Rowlandson, Schwartz reminds us that it was a much greater challenge for the enslaved people to whom many of the social categories that determined sincerity were unavailable.

While there are moments where the density of Schwartz’s analysis necessitates some parsing and a few times when the cast of characters becomes slightly difficult to follow, this is a well-written, thoughtfully researched, and insightful analysis of the colonial world that helps us better understand America’s complicated history with sincerity. It is Schwartz’s connections between early colonial conceptions of sympathy and our contemporary emotional landscapes that make this book uniquely approachable to those with interests outside of early America. As Schwartz writes, in bringing her cast of characters to life, she is not attempting to drum up sympathy for the New England Puritans but rather asking that we “consider more thoughtfully whose perspective we are taking up—and whose we are neglecting—when we take any individual’s claims to sincerity as authoritative” (255). In a landscape where sincerity still informs our actions, where our intentions are inextricably linked to our character, and where public performances of sincerity occur on a world stage, *Unmoored* gives us the tools to question what it means to know ourselves and make ourselves known. When read carefully, it might also provide a pathway for us to slow down, acknowledge our limitations, and more generously account for the shortcomings of those around us.

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