A concept such as sincerity is easily taken for granted, Ana Schwartz admits, and it may well seem like a strange or fruitless subject for historical study. This is, however, by design—Schwartz argues as much from the very first line of *Unmoored: The Search for Sincerity in Colonial America*, with the compelling if somewhat enigmatic assertion that “sincerity is the protagonist of this book; history, its antagonist” (p. 1). This idea is predicated on Schwartz’s claim that sincerity has achieved “near invisibility” conceptually by having successfully cast itself as an ahistorical, universal, and immutable ideal. As such, scholarly work on sincerity has primarily considered it as an “artistic standard” in literature, and Schwartz is correct when she says that few have attempted to historicize the concept itself. *Unmoored* sets out to fill this gap, aiming specifically to explain how sincerity “came to seem desirable and possible” for seventeenth-century Puritan settlers in colonial New England (p. 3). Simultaneously, Schwartz seeks to explore the varying impetuses and implications the search for sincerity had for the Indigenous neighbors and enslaved African captives of these devout English colonists.

Schwartz is quick to stress that the view this book offers into sincerity’s history is not merely an interchangeable case study intended to demonstrate the cultural variability of this slippery concept, but rather shows that the early modern English settlers it examines played a critical role in sincerity’s “figurative ascent” and ongoing legacy (p. 3). The uncertain, dangerous, and violent realities of frontier life worked to heighten what Schwartz identifies as “the early modern promise ... that sincerity could purchase stability, happiness, and fulfilment” (p. 2). This context underpins Schwartz’s overarching thesis that Puritan settlers’ rigid conceptualization of the “promise” of sincerity—which required relentless self-examination and often humiliating public confession while insisting that these practices were in service of a divinely mandated universal ideal—came to limit contemporary understandings of goodness, happiness, and fulfilment. In turn, Schwartz aims to demonstrate the negative consequences sincerity...
held for the English settlers who cherished and promoted it, as well as, most disastrously, the non-European individuals who contended with colonists as neighbors, allies, friends, enemies, masters, and captors.

*Unmoored* is a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary study populated by a compelling and diverse array of arguments and sources, and its broad scope is undoubtedly one of its key strengths; at the same time, this study's impressive breadth plays a role in the fact that its central protagonist—sincerity—frequently runs the risk of fading into the background. The introduction gives a sense of the various topics being juggled, including but not limited to the subjects of its four section headings: 1) biopoetics; 2) settler colonialism; 3) subjection; and 4) repression. Schwartz's novel reexamination of Michel Foucault's theory of biopoetics (the lesser-known counterpart to biopolitics) is likely one of the less accessible moments in what is an often challenging and dense book, but her argument that biopoetics is a useful tool for analyzing relationships between truth, self-examination, and systems of power in the seventeenth century continually proves to be an integral part of the book's theoretical fabric. It also dovetails nicely with Schwartz's insistence that we need to look beyond the supposedly "good intentions" of colonists when considering the beliefs they used to justify their actions, a perspective which enables *Unmoored* to unpack the nuanced realities and consequences of settler colonialism for the Black and Indigenous figures who are at the heart of the story Schwartz wants to tell about sincerity's history. On the other hand, subjection (as a feature of both language and power) and repression (as an emotional mechanism and process) come across as comparatively secondary. Though undoubtedly recurring themes, their less explicit treatment at times requires the reader to infer their relevance within the bigger picture—and the same might be said, more consequentially, for sincerity itself.

The first chapter works to sketch the broader early modern context surrounding seventeenth-century “settler sincerity,” looking at how encounters with new lands, cultures, and peoples challenged once-confident European epistemologies. The uncertainty such experiences inspired, Schwartz claims, threatened Puritan settlers’ understandings of “truth as firm, absolute, and universal,” thus upsetting core religious beliefs about the wickedness of human nature and the necessary spiritual pursuit of goodness (p. 44). As colonial bodies and minds grappled with how the material and intellectual challenges of the New World threatened both their physical and psychological existence, deep-seated feelings of fear and paranoia eventually took root. Particularly strong here is Schwartz’s analysis of the ways in which English colonial fear often served as a motivation and justification for violence against any perceived threats, including those supposedly posed by previously diplomatic Indigenous neighbors. This argument proves central throughout the book, and it is in large part convincing thanks to this chapter’s deft illustration of Puritan assumptions about selfhood and the inherently violent and deceitful nature of mankind.

Even so, additional clarification regarding sincerity’s significance, meaning, and cultural context, as well as its connection to related concepts such as truth and the self, would have helped to solidify the foundations of the numerous important points found throughout the first chapter and the book as a whole. For instance, although Schwartz references Lionel Trilling’s seminal work on sincerity, his useful discussion of the sixteenth-century “birth” and ascendance of the word in the English language goes unmentioned. [1] This seems like something of a missed opportunity, especially in light of Schwartz’s interest in language and her awareness that “words change depending on their context” (p. 215). Indeed, in the same place the book considers the multiple changing meanings of the word “friendship” between English and Indigenous languages to pro-
ductive ends—why not give “sincerity” itself the same treatment?[2] Moreover, scholars beyond Trilling have produced informative research on early modern sincerity, individualism, and selfhood, much of which could have been used to orient the reader in the broader theoretical and historiographical framework. Studies that Unmoored does not reference such as Stephen Greenblatt’s Renaissance Self-Fashioning and John Martin’s Myths of Renaissance Individualism come to mind, with the latter being especially pertinent as one of the few studies that has specifically worked to historicize sincerity and highlight its importance within Reformed Christianity.[3] Also relevant are more recent articles on Puritan sincerity in seventeenth-century Britain that offer crucial context regarding the culture that shaped and influenced Calvinist separatists, regardless of their decision to leave it behind.[4] Schwartz never really delves into this background, yet considering it even briefly could have helped to contextualize sincerity and demonstrate what exactly was so unique about its colonial development.

Chapter 2, however, does advance many of the first’s most promising ideas. Schwartz has a sharp eye for unusual and absorbing case studies, and the second chapter’s focus on colonial America’s beaver population is a good example of this. Beavers’ impressive infrastructural abilities fascinated Europeans yet proved too close to civilized “reason” for comfort, challenging settlers’ insistence “that animal affection and human reason were all that distinct in the first place” (p. 45). Schwartz compares stories about beavers from local Indigenous traditions with colonial assumptions and practices to argue for these groups’ “different understanding[s] of the category of the human,” ultimately making an interesting case for the dissonance between Indigenous “thoughtfulness” and settler “sympathy” (p. 114). For Puritan colonists, “self-disclosure was the substance of sympathetic fellow-feeling,” yet it was limited to emotional bonds between humans and rejected “shared dependence”; alternatively, Native Algonquian thoughtfulness “crossed the human-animal distinction” in its “deliberate attentiveness to the experience of other beings and to the network of dependence that characterizes the material world” (p. 45). Though the connections made between sympathy, self-disclosure, and sincerity could be better explained, this chapter is effective in highlighting the practical implications of settlers’ worldview for the Indigenous individuals who had to negotiate English fear and paranoia, as the failure to take these feelings seriously, Schwartz claims, was seen as “a failure of sympathy, a failure to discern [English] sincerity” (p. 117).

In what is likely the standout of the book, chapter 3 provides an excellent exploration of “some of the reasons individuals worked so strenuously, sometimes mortifyingly, to be able to claim that they knew themselves” (p. 46). Here Schwartz focuses on a range of individuals who “found the prospect of self-disclosure grueling” (p. 46), offering the book’s most successful explanation of how Puritan settlers expected sincerity to be practiced (from the introspective self-examination of diaries and poems to the public confession of converts and transgressors), and why this process might have seemed worth it to those who found sincerity’s demands “mortifying.” This chapter’s analysis of Native converts is especially evocative, as Schwartz convincingly argues for the high stakes felt by “initiates who wanted conversion deeply enough to reorganize much of their lives and to estrange themselves from many of their kin for it” (p. 156). Though public confession was almost inevitably humiliating and difficult, Schwartz details how conversion may have offered Native converts social acceptance and community cohesion as they “found themselves often isolated in a world” altered by both “clearly intentional and possibly unintentional” colonial violence (pp. 46–47). The stories of Algonquian proselytes such as Ponampam and Nishohkou are complemented by those of the English settlers Michael Wigglesworth and Anne Bradstreet, who
similarly persisted in painful practices of self-examination and self-disclosure not solely due to spiritual conviction, but because they, too, craved the social recognition sincerity offered.

The final chapters largely continue this focus on those who suffered, emotionally and otherwise, as a result of settler sincerity’s rigid dictates. Chapter 4 takes a detour into questions of duty, debt, and kinship to demonstrate how “one of the foremost costs of sincerity as settlers practiced it” was resentment, or “a longing for suffering’s recognition, usually across divisions of age and generation” (p. 47). This claim is strengthened by its grounding in previous historiography on early modern credit and the economy of obligation as well as the anxiety-inducing potential of Calvinist doctrine, allowing for an interesting discussion of how emotional and material debts were passed down from parents to children in an attempt to “vindicate suffering” (p. 47).[5] The chapter links youthful mob violence committed against Indigenous peoples to the resentment and desire for social recognition suffering bred, which it then deliberately contrasts with alternative modes of sincerity that did not lionize struggle. Schwartz finds such an approach in the sermons of James Allen, whose pursuit of self-knowledge prized happiness and welcomed uncertainty, concluding with the compelling suggestion that the emancipated Black woman Dorcas’s choice to switch church membership and join Allen’s congregation speaks to the appeal of his more flexible and indulgent style.

Chapter 5 advances this discussion of debt, suffering, and uncertainty through the study of four individuals who “needed friendship, but … also knew that friendship directed them to understand personhood in an almost unbearably individuated fashion” (p. 205). These individuals, Schwartz says, “often didn’t know who they really were” yet were forced to perform individuality and self-knowledge to lay claim to “life-sustaining friendships” (p. 48). The chapter identifies the circumstances that catalyzed their doubts, uncertainties, and identity crises as the same which put them in need of material and economic support in the first place, ranging from the wartime captivity of celebrity hostage Mary Rowlandson and the cross-cultural diplomacy of translator Roger Williams to the double-agent status of Native convert James Quananopohit and the near-death experience of shipwreck survivor Anthony Thacher. Unmoored interprets each case as a demonstration of the paradoxical and “tiresome performance of sincerity” that friendship could require, and though Schwartz may overstate the originality of her approach to (early modern) friendship as performative, mercenary, and alienating, her provocative claim that friendship “blanketed, but only barely, the intense bereavement that settlers have tried to narrate as a triumph of virtue in the wasteland they created for themselves” is as worthy of consideration as it is likely to provoke debate (p. 49).

This book tackles an ambitious and impressive variety of themes, sources, and arguments, and its core contention that sincerity has been taken for granted addresses a significant historiographical gap. This assertion is also, however, somewhat at odds with the fact that Unmoored often operates on the assumption that sincerity’s significance is readily understood. Schwartz certainly has valuable things to say about sincerity, and it is undeniably part of the bigger picture she unveils, but it is not always convincing as the central part. This book is perhaps at its most urgent when attending to its interest in settler colonialism, an approach which enables Schwartz to put forth some of her most exciting ideas about identity, selfhood, and the early modern tension between interiority and the external world. As Schwartz often has the most to say about this overarching search for the self in the context of settler colonialism rather than the search for sincerity per se, one wonders if Unmoored might have benefited from reworking its framing along these lines. Nevertheless, the above critiques are tempered by the book’s strengths and the important scholarly contribution it makes. It is not only a
richly thought-provoking and original study, but it is one that opens the door to questions and avenues for future research which should prove of interest to literary scholars and historians of colonial America and the wider early modern world alike.

Notes


[5]. See, for example, Craig Muldrew, The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England (New York: Springer, 1998). Most of the research Schwartz cites on Puritan practice and belief comes from older works, however, such as Philip Greven, The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America (New York: Knopf, 1977); the study could have benefited from engaging with more recent research on this subject. See, for ex-
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