

The books that inspired Henrietta Moore: “A nineteenth century novel is a good story... the details are frequently overwhelming, not unlike doing ethnographic fieldwork”

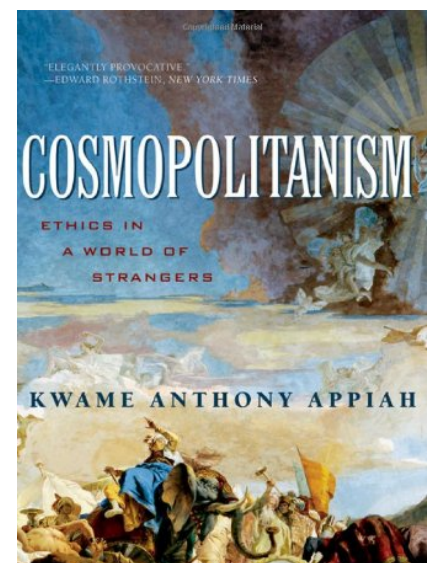
Henrietta Moore is a cultural theorist and social anthropologist and the William Wyse Chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. She is a leading theorist of gender in the social sciences and has worked extensively in Africa, particularly on gender, livelihood strategies, social transformation and symbolic systems. Here she discusses the books that inspired her into the field.



My interest in anthropology started with stories. Schools handed out prizes in the shape of books they thought would be improving. I can't remember what the prize was for, but I can remember that it was a set of stories from Greek and Roman mythology. What caught my imagination was the arbitrary character of the divine and the impossibility of fate. Everything might be going your way, but it would always turn out badly in the end! Gods were fickle, unpredictable and murderously dangerous, but also shape changers. What might it be like to have your veins filled with the ethereal golden substance ichor, to disregard the desires of those lesser beings the merely mortal and be able to transform yourself into a white bull and carry off the woman of your fancy? Hubris was a major theme, poor old Icarus and his wax-wings.

But, much more important for the not-yet-anthropologist was the idealisation of kinship, the hopeless question of family inheritance, the ties of loyalty and their relation to fealty. Can you know your true self and how much of the answer to that question is about origins? The best known story of all says it all. The tale of Oedipus tied to a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother – my later interest in psychoanalysis started then, long before I had read any Freud or any anthropology! But worse was to come because his daughter Antigone carried a terrible family inheritance with her, marked by his maiming, she insisted on defying Creon to bury her brother Polynices. Could she have done otherwise? The question of whether you can ever escape your family, your culture, your gender runs like a golden thread through all of my writing on feminism and anthropology, as it does indeed through the writing and scholarship of all feminists. It is our true inheritance.

I vividly remember reading Anouilh's *Antigone* at school, and it's a story and a set of questions that don't go away because they underpin such huge issues in philosophy and the social sciences. I read Hegel on Antigone as an undergraduate, but found myself drawn back into the whole story through reading Judith Butler's [Antigone's Claim](#). What might we learn from the personal tragedies of others, something about the human condition or just the smaller tragedy of individual emotion, inner experience, the peculiar qualities of personality and individual whim? Butler's brilliant reading is animated by the ever present question, could Antigone have done otherwise? What does the perverse refusal of power and loyalty tells us about family ties, and beyond that about gender and sexual agency? Writing [Feminism and Anthropology](#) was the first step on a long detour towards those questions, not necessarily answering them, but finding the right way to pose them. I often look for that trace in the writings of other scholars, the way in which they struggle to delineate the problem, returning to the



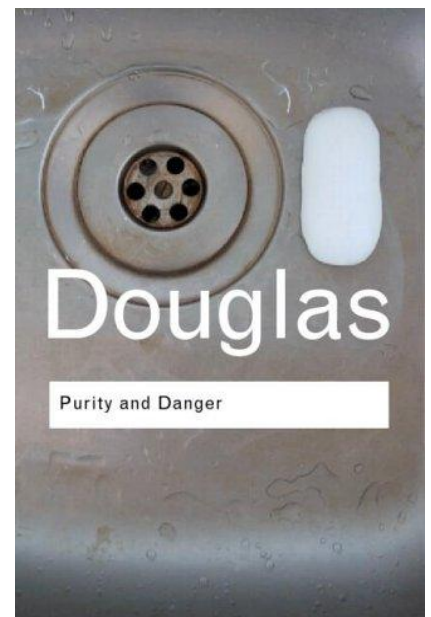
key philosophical question for the social sciences 'what is it that we owe others'? That question looms large in writing about multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, and is brilliantly handled by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his [Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers](#).



The question of what we owe others is constrained not only by what we owe to family, community and nation, but also in modern times by the question of what we owe ourselves. Psychoanalytic theory and its relation to culture is the space in which I pursue that question, but it also began in my teenage years with the reading of nineteenth century novels. A nineteenth century novel is a good story, usually a very long one in which many things happen and digression is the order of the day. The details are frequently overwhelming, not unlike doing ethnographic fieldwork, and they make excellent training for not-yet-anthropologists who will inevitably find themselves having to take an inordinate amount of interests in other people's families, histories, long dead relatives, dissolute uncles and the rest.

They are also extraordinarily productive for the feminist imagination, being full of women who dream, have aspirations, do not do as others wish them to, and sometimes come to a sticky end. I'm a big supporter of [Madame Bovary](#). The Kindle has done wonders for the nineteenth century novel because not only are many of them now free, but you no longer have to carry around a capacious bag strong enough to support their weight. Re-reading, Trollope's [Barchester Towers](#) reminded me of how slimy is the egregious Mr Slope. With a faint whiff of formaldehyde sanctity, he's ambitious, greedy, underhand and disgusting in every way. His purpose in the tale is key to the plot, but much more importantly his vices have the effect of focusing our awareness, turning the spotlight on the vices of other men, even those we are drawn to side with. In the same way, we might luxuriate in our dislike of the odious Mrs Proudie, the Bishop's wife, but her domineering manner and vulgar pretension directs us unhesitatingly towards the recognition that the heroine of the tale, the rich and desirable Eleanor Bold, has deep flaws. Her intractable insistence on seeing the world from a particular point of view is not necessarily a good advert for feminist agency, however much we might wish it to be so.

What drew me to anthropology was the fascination of people watching, but more than that an interest in motivation and intention. Have I read this person, this situation right? As an undergraduate, much anthropology teaching concentrated on the process of making strange, of getting us as students to see things differently, to grasp similarities across difference and vice versa. My heroine in this regard was [Mary Douglas](#), with her wonderful accounts of why food appears in the order it does on menus – why can't you eat pudding first? – and why shoes should not be placed on tables. The answers weren't the prosaic ones of common sense and hygiene, but the much more exciting ones of culture, symbolism, interpretation and meaning making. Every neophyte anthropologist should read [Purity and Danger](#).



But, questions of difference are intractable in anthropology, and they are always caught up with politics. In my work on gender and sexuality in Africa, I am constantly aware of the importance of not placing a particular framework, explanatory account or theory onto other people's lives and in the process claiming to have made sense of those lives. There are, of course, data that one gathers through the formal methods of social science and there are theoretical frameworks and standards for evaluation – all are profitable and useful. But, the central work is still the truly fascinating one of trying to elucidate what we can learn from the lives of others.

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