**Histories of Artificial Intelligence: A Genealogy of Power Preface**

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This *Themes* issue represents the main academic output of the University of Cambridge Andrew W. Mellon Sawyer Seminar – Histories of Artificial Intelligence: A Genealogy of Power (HoAI) – which ran from May 2020 to December 2021. The Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminars provide support for comparative research on the historical and cultural sources of contemporary developments, enabling intense study and intellectual exchange across disciplines, across different levels in the academy (from graduate student to professor) and across sectors.

HoAI was designed with the aim of developing an interpretive community capable of offering a structural, historical perspective on the character of AI and machine learning. We planned to open the Seminar in July 2020 with a week-long summer school at the University of Cambridge. We had made most of the preparations for this event when, of course, Covid-19 arrived. As in most areas of life and work, the pandemic forced us to radically rethink our plans. And at least in this one respect, we are very glad we had to do so. Being compelled to move the Seminar online resulted in a re-conceptualisation of how international collaborative research can be undertaken, and led to the formation of a global community that met for over 150 hours throughout the first year of the pandemic. Out of the forced abandonment of our in-person plans flourished an online Seminar that consisted of three events most months, on average attended by 60 people – 14 reading group meetings, 13 methods and critical issues training sessions, and 10 community research seminars.[[1]](#endnote-1) From May 2020 to July 2021, HoAI hosted over 100 speakers from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, USA, Canada, Brazil, Russia, South Africa, UK, Germany, France, Denmark, Ireland, Belgium, and The Netherlands. HoAI supported 2 Graduate Dissertation Fellowships, 11 International Research and Collaboration Awards (given to researchers based in Brazil, USA, Russia, India, Malaysia and Germany) and an International Research and Collaboration Award for Translation (given to a researcher based in Canada, studying India).[[2]](#endnote-2) The Seminar funding contributed to other important spin-off events, including ‘Histories of AI: imaginaries and materialities’, organised by the DigiLabour Research Lab, Brazil, ‘Cinematic experiments with artificial intelligence: exploring the expressive and activist potential of AI from an arts and humanities perspective’ at New York University, USA, and ‘The philosophy and critical thought of AI’ at the University of Oxford, UK.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The impact of HoAI, on its organisers and its participants was profound – during a challenging year, we found ourselves immersed in what for many of us was the most intense and productive collaborative inquiry they had experienced. The HoAI community sustained many of us intellectually, but also emotionally and socially, through that dark pandemic year – it was, in the words of Simon Taylor, a contributor to this *Themes* issue, 'a lighthouse each month'.

We rounded off HoAI's online year with a Virtual Summer School, featuring keynote addresses from Wendy Chun, Ruha Benjamin, Kalindi Vora, and Ulises A. Mejias and engagement from 620 attendees as well as presentations from the contributors whose articles we had selected for this issue of *BJHS Themes*.[[4]](#endnote-4) And, despite the omicron wave looming on the horizon, we were finally able to hold the Seminar's only in person (and virtual) event in the form of a Winter Symposium in Cambridge in December 2022, consisting in 30 papers given by presenters from 11 countries (Canada, US, UK, The Netherlands, Russia, India, Germany, Australia, Brazil, Mexico, Sweden).[[5]](#endnote-5) Although even before the pandemic we were planning to hold hybrid meetings and promote international research collaborations in service of our intellectual goals, we are grateful to the members of the HoAI community for working with us to explore the possibilities for collaboration and connection in such different circumstances, whether able to meet in person or not. We have learnt just how much can be achieved online if cultured appropriately, and how people from all over the world can convene to think together (without the luxury or barriers of financial resources and time for travel, as well as environmental waste).

Whilst the Sawyer Seminars do not require the production of an output, we wanted to honour, gather and share the richness of its intellectual work. The HoAI website archives much of that, including two public talks (at the Cambridge Festival and at CogX), and an open accessmodel syllabus for a graduate course on Histories of AI.[[6]](#endnote-6) This *Themes* issue provides another site of circulation and exchange, which we hope will provide a foundation for ongoing and future work. We are grateful to our contributors, for their hard work bringing it to fruition, as well as to all those who gave their time, energy and expertise to make HoAI the phenomenon that it was.

1. For the HoAI reading group meetings see https://www.ai.hps.cam.ac.uk/activities/reading-group; methods and critical issues training sessions, https://www.ai.hps.cam.ac.uk/activities/methods-and-critical-issues-training; community research seminars, https://www.ai.hps.cam.ac.uk/activities/community-research-seminars. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For details of the HoAI fellowships and awards, see https://www.ai.hps.cam.ac.uk/fellowships-and-awards. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Histories of AI: Imaginaries and materialities, DigiLabour Research Lab, Brazil, https://digilabour.com.br/2021/04/05/histories-of-ai-imaginaries-and-materialities-seminar-april-19-20/; ‘Cinematic experiments with Artificial Intelligence: exploring the expressive and activist potential of AI from an Arts and humanities perspective’, New York University, USA, https://tisch.nyu.edu/cinema-studies/events/spring-2021/cinematic-experiments-artificial-intelligence; ‘The philosophy and critical thought of AI’ at the University of Oxford, UK, https://www.queens.ox.ac.uk/events/philosophy-and-critical-thinking-ai, all accessed 28 October 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For details of the HoAI Virtual Summer School, see https://www.ai.hps.cam.ac.uk/summer-school. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For details of the HoAI Winter Symposium, see https://www.ai.hps.cam.ac.uk/activities/winter-symposium. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The Seminar’s activities are archived on the HoAI website, https://www.ai.hps.cam.ac.uk/. A recording of the CogX event can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ii4gCBTv5Q0, accessed 29 October 2023. Access to the HoAI model syllabus is here: https://www.ai.hps.cam.ac.uk/outputs/model-syllabus. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)