Hello, all, and welcome to my talk, "Payton vs. "Jazz": Unpacking the Racialized Power Dynamics of an Instagram Meme." In the next twenty minutes, I'll be discussing a social media flareup I noticed in late 2019 between the Instagram meme account Jazz Memes [SLIDE] and musician Nicholas Payton [SLIDE]. We'll see that what a content creator considered a harmless joke, an artist considered a racist drag – and this will point us toward some recommendations for change in institutional jazz pedagogy.

This talk is a small corner of work I've been doing in the last year considering race, gender, and representation in jazz pedagogy. Having earned a master's degree in jazz saxophone performance and working as a jazz and commercial saxophonist for years, I am myself a product of that training and have an insider's access to some of its logic. I was fortunate to study with some wonderful folks during my formal training but have struggled for a long time to articulate my feelings of bad faith in some of its structuring logic. This project interrogating biases in institutional jazz pedagogy that seemed important a year ago seems more obvious and vital after the events of the last season; especially the project of locating and rooting out normalized manifestations of white supremacy and colonial logic.

So, let's start with some music and then get to the memes. Though there is no musical object, per se, that informs this talk, I will begin with a moment of a 2018 performance from Nicholas Payton in a trio setting with Jonathan Barber on drums and Ben Williams on bass that speaks to some its concerns. A celebrated trumpeter, Payton here plays Fender Rhodes and uses a sampler to bring in the voice of drummer Max Roach, taken from a 1980s interview wherein Roach discusses a project called "Jazz is a Four-Letter Word" that criticizes the concept of "jazz" in racialized artistic and political economies. [VIDEO]

So, then, I'm here today to talk about a meme and the reactions it provoked. As it's 2020 I will assume that I don't have to explain too much about what an internet meme is, though here are some classic styles and formats you may recognize [SLIDE]. I will, however, indicate my assumptions that the internet meme is a [SLIDE] hyper-memetic, hyper-signifying phenomenon leveraging user-driven imitation and remixing. Occurring in digital culture media spaces, meme logic is intertextual and deploys the remixing of familiar images and formats to pack several layers of mutually-inflecting meanings into one node of thickly signifying visual space.[1] For these multiple meanings to be legible, however, one must have the practical capacity to recognize them. This capacity to "get it" is related to insider knowledge about the meaningful symbols and tropes in a discursive field that create, inform, and reproduce its community's collective values and beliefs.

That being the case, the content of the Jazz Memes Instagram account invites us to consider just what the jazz community is invited to "get" via its images of celebrated musicians coupled with contemporary musical, economic, cultural, and pedagogical concerns. What's there is not only humor, but also its baked-in assumptions, elisions, and biases of the supposedly post-racial logic of institutional jazz pedagogy. As David Ake noted in 2010: "College programs have replaced the proverbial street as a primary training grounds for young jazz musicians and also replaced nightclubs as the primary professional homes of hundreds of jazz performers and composers."[2]

Thus, whatever attitudes and practices are normalized in educational spaces and their supporting corollaries inform the greater musical, material, and political economies of the artistic practice.

What we see in the content of Jazz Memes Instagram account [SLIDE] often puts the concerns of jazz students in the minds of the architects of the jazz tradition whose recorded works are studied and revered by "jazzbros" [SLIDE]; a term for today's young jazz aficionado that will come back later. In 2013, both Nate Chinen and David A. Graham wrote short pieces for Jazztimes and The Atlantic, respectively [SLIDE]. Chinen described the jazzbro as a [SLIDE]:

> …self-styled jazz aficionado, overwhelmingly male and usually a musician in training himself, who expresses a handful of determinative social behaviors. Among these are a migratory pattern from the practice room, where they often nest alone, to the jazz club, where they travel in packs…[3]

The demographic of the average jazzbro described here with regard to gender and race matches the data for the average jazz degree holder as evidenced by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System's numbers for 2017.[4] This overwhelmingly white and male community, I surmise, is the target market for the Jazz Memes Instagram account that presently boasts 150,000 followers. And I mean market, as, in addition to offering humorous content, they also offer free educational material while selling a marketing program to help musicians grow their own online presence – and also selling Jazz Memes merch like facemasks and clothing.

The meme in question for today is from November 25, 2019 and features an image of Nicholas Payton in the then-popular meme format: "Gonna tell my kids this was…." This was a common format that month that plays with history, meaning, and identity by substituting whatever phenomenon in question with a humorous substitute. [SLIDES] As you might expect from his song with which I opened, Payton was not amused to have been memed. You can read Payton's reply to this on the right side of the image where he'd left a comment. He says [SLIDE]:

> This is the second time Jazz Memes has posted some disrespectful shit towards me. I let the first one go where they made a mean-spirited meme using my album cover to portray me having cancer. To my knowledge, they'd never used someone's album cover or "joked" about someone having a terminal illness. Now they've made this racist post. Why is it racist? Because they are aware of my vehement stance that I am not a jazz musician. To suggest they have the power to call me "jazz" despite what I've said, reflects a colonialist mindset and is racist. It's akin to calling Kunta Kinte, "Toby." It's calling me outside my name. It's tantamount to calling me the N-word. I'm all for a good joke, but I don't find this type of thing funny.[5]

The joke—and Payton's reaction—only makes sense if you have some insider knowledge about his attitude toward the word and concept of "jazz" and the tension it's created in the jazz world. [SLIDE] Nicholas Payton famously pronounced the death of "jazz" in a series of blog posts in 2011 and has characterized the history of the concept and term "jazz" as a colonizing racist project. He is far from the first artist to make these moves and distance himself from "jazz." The word "jazz" has been variously characterized as a racially informed means by which to pigeon-

hole and commoditize a heterogeneous world of cultural expression informed by the Black experience in the United States. Payton joins notable artists such as Duke Ellington, Max Roach, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, and Gary Bartz in demanding not to be labeled a "jazz" musician. Rather, he has offered the appellation "Black American Music," or, "#BAM" [SLIDE] to describe his work. Jazz, for Payton, is a four-letter word, a slur related to white supremacy and histories of Black oppression. Referring to his own music and the legacy from which he draws influence as Black American Music is an act of self-determination and agency. Furthermore, he recognizes his methods and attitudes to be in a socio-cultural and historical alignment with a way of navigating the world that is necessarily informed by the Black experience in America.

After Payton's protestations in the Instagram comments as well as those of a number of other musicians, Jazz Memes attempted to distance themselves from claims of racism. Their apology, however, was wanting and displays markers of what Robin DiAngelo has termed white fragility.[6] Their response seeks to diffuse, rather than engage the issue at hand. It begins with a meme [SLIDE], focuses on the levity of their site [SLIDE], asserts the import of engaging with non-prescriptive humor and play that might sometimes offend folks, invokes an appeal for safety, and finally [SLIDE] states that #BAM as a concept was lucky to have been memed so that more people know about it. Payton was not mollified and uploaded a video a few days later.[7] [VIDEO]

More than address the importance of humor or the history of the word "jazz," Payton calls out jazz pedagogy and suggests its abstracting and formalistic logic does violence to the cultural expression and its lifeworld. Informed by colonial logic, he suggests institutional jazz pedagogy normalizes a culture that fails to recognize its implication in the reproduction of oppressive, racialized power structures.

I want to stress that I absolutely do not believe that the folks that run Jazz Memes Instagram account—who turn out to be two white men with jazz degrees—are intentionally engaging in anti-black racism. However, this instance of misunderstanding and disagreement in a hyper-signifying social media space is epiphenomenal of a greater institutional culture. It demonstrates several strands of logic in contemporary jazz pedagogy that may unintentionally work against efforts of anti-racist action and decolonization. In the next few minutes I'll locate and quickly address just a few of these. Issues include a post-racial, colorblind pedagogy often coupled with an institutional idea of music as formal object autonomous of the social structures in which it originally created, as well as uncritical engagement with Blacksound and digital blackface – both normalized forms of minstrelsy.

Eitan Wilf reminds us that "[j]azz's entrance into academia has taken place in tandem with the increased representation of white middle- and upper-middle-class players in the jazz world. Against the backdrop of contentious American racial politics, white educators may be reluctant to introduce the history of exclusion, segregation, and bigotry that have been an integral part of jazz's own history."[8] In an effort to move beyond histories of inequity, colorblind and post-racial pedagogy disincentivizes students—especially white students—from engaging in conversations about race, leaving the real, material inequities unaddressed and unchanged.[9]

Furthermore, much of this has come to take place in institutional pedagogical settings that have forced a music with a vernacular apprenticeship pedagogical model into a European conservatory model that platforms theory, formalism, and analytical strategies informed by notions of aesthetic autonomy.[10] Said platforming can preclude the import of subjectivity, conflating and subsuming what were certainly heterogeneous and personal musical choices under the aegis of specialized institutional knowledge.

Of this, Wilf suggests: [SLIDE] "Educators' strategies of [formalist] interpretation strengthen the link between the school's expert knowledge and the legendary past masters." For example, by demonstrating the theoretical perfection of an exemplar solo, "educators deify and further validate the past masters. Consequently, this deification increased the masters' role as authorizing agents for the school's institutionalized terminology when it is demonstrated time and again in class that the masters 'had thought' all along in the terms of this terminology in the course of their playing."[11]

The student of formalist institutional thinking is authorized to imagine they are inhabiting the mind of the master; that the musician being studied thought just as they are being taught to think. Instead of considering improvisation as a socially and historically situated cultural expression of personal agency, the student is authorized to believe that exemplary musicians of the past were—to caricaturize a bit—engaged in solving creative math problems and were worried about chord-scale relationships and shedding just like themselves [SLIDE].

I'll also quickly mention the relevance of unintentional instances of blackface minstrelsy normalized and made invisible by this post-racial, colorblind, and formalist pedagogy as well as the disembodied and impersonal nature of digital culture. [SLIDE] Understood as a sonorous analog to blackface minstrelsy, Blacksound is an object of study as well as a methodology developed by Matthew D. Morrison that demonstrates how the construction of raced sound comprises American popular music; most often to the benefit of non-Black artists and at the expense of the Black artists and communities whose ingenuity is appropriated.[12]

An uncritical performer can engage in the performance of raced modes of musical production while not having to inhabit the marginalized space of racialized power structures. This allows the non-Black subject to put on Blackness - not with burnt cork, but with musical gestures and vocabulary. Seeking to learn from and sound like master musicians is, of course, not a bad thing. However, in this case, the admiration and performance of Blacksound—if not informed by critical engagement with the history of Black music in America—does not immediately translate into a conscious alignment with anti-racist practice.

Finally, in the digital space of social media, the potentially negative implications of all of this logic can be obfuscated in the encoding and decoding occurring between ambiguously related meaningful structures.[13] [SLIDE] This results in a form of blackface minstrelsy that is a memetic sort of "critical fabulation"[14] that works to ventriloquize Blackness as social media's logic of disengaged engagement allows for the mediation or obfuscation of the identity of the author.

The impersonal nature of meme space permits the immediate exigencies of still-present racialized power structures to be seemingly neutralized with issues of race lost in the disembodied activity of interface interaction. Memes allow for a substitution or erasure of the "real thing" with a stylized version or interloper that, in the case of Jazz Memes, allows the replacement of the actual artist's intent, personal symbolic world, and social exigencies with a whitened version the reflects the values of contemporary economies and performances of Blackness in the supposedly post-racial, colorblind culture at large.

The fallout from this one meme says a lot. My conclusions after this brief analysis are that, if the study of jazz and the full constellation of Black American Musical practices to which it is related is to continue in institutional spaces, it must be reimagined in a manner that engages with the realities of white supremacy and racialized power structures that informed the cultural expressions so admired by its students – and that unfortunately still inform the present. Our job going forward is to recognize normalized problematic appropriation and racist activity that have been made invisible in pedagogical models through orientations to post-racial and colorblind pedagogy. We must work to [SLIDE] historicize, diversify, and culturally emplace improvisational methods of analysis and pedagogy. We must supplement formal analytical strategies with historiography and critical race theory. All of this in order to recognize and divest from white supremacy and colonial logics insidiously implicated in the very structures of our epistemologies and value systems. This is a lot of work, but nothing changes if nothing changes. [SLIDE] So, let's get to it – and thank you for your time and attention.

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[1] Shifman, Limor. 2014. "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres." *Journal of Visual Culture* 13 (3): 340-58.

[2] Ake, David. 2010. "Rethinking Jazz Education." In *Jazz Matters: Sound, Place, and Time Since Bebop,* 102-20. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 103.

[3] Nate Chinen, "Behold the Jazzbro," *JazzTimes*, July 18, 2013.

[4] https://datausa.io/profile/cip/jazz-jazz-studies

[5] Payton, Nicholas. Comments on @jazzmemes_ Instagram post, November 25, 2019: https://www.instagram.com/p/B5Sjb5hFfsR/

[6] DiAngelo, Robin. 2011. "White Fragiility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagagy* 3 (3): 54-70.

[7] Moderator Comments on @jazzmemes_ Instagram post, November 26, 2019: https://www.instagram.com/p/B5VaYKelhUg/

[8] Wilf, Eitan Y. 2014. *School for Cool: The Academic Jazz Program and the paradox of Institutionalized Creativity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 160

[9] Warren, Christopher A. 2012. "The Effect of Post-Racial Theory on Education." *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 10 (1): 197-216.

[10] Tomlinson, Gary. 2002. "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies." *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (Supplement: Best of BMRJ): 71-105.

[11] Wilf, 157.

[12] Morrison, Matthew D. 2019. "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re) Making of Musicological Discourse." Journal of the American Musicological Society 72 (3): 781-823.

[13] Hall, Stuart. 1980. "Encoding/Decoding." In *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, edited by Stuart. Hall, Doothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, & Paul Willis. London: Routledge : 128-380.

[14] Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12 (2): 1-14.