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## Heavy Metal Fundraisers: Entrepreneurial Recording Artists in Platform Capitalism

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Media Studies

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## **Abstract**

How do cultural producers square customary understandings of what it means to be authentic and autonomous creators in new contexts characterized by digital-era entrepreneurial pressures and online platform-mediated financial opportunities? This study examines how heavy metal recording artists experience these pressures; how some of them engage in platform-based crowdfunding, argue over its legitimacy, and rationalize varying degrees of acceptance and dependence. First, my analysis centers on a case study which follows the experiences of a progressive metal band as they navigate a new financial relation in conjunction first with the fundraising platform Pozible and then the patronage-based crowdfunding platform Patreon. Second, I undertake a political-economic analysis of the Patreon platform, interpreting it as a rent-seeking technology company situated in the broader context of platform capitalism. I suggest that Patreon perpetuates long-standing power disparities in the culture industries by concentrating the risks and duties of production, marketing and retailing more squarely upon its fundraisers. Third, I examine recording artists' interpretations of the neo-patronage relation based on data culled from interviews with Patreon users. The results indicate that online crowdfunding remains an ideologically contested practice among cultural producers stamped with late twentieth-century masculinist "rock values." The cultural weight of the older "recording contract"-based institutional model poses a problem for heavy metal recording artists who struggle to validate their participation in more entrepreneurial, platform-mediated work.

## **Keywords**

Recording Artistry, Music Industries, Entrepreneurism, Autonomy, Platform Capitalism, Online Platforms, Heavy Metal, Patreon, Crowdfunding, Patronage, Authenticity

## **Summary for Lay Audience**

This study examines how recording artists are engaging new promotional and financial opportunities in the world of online platforms. First, I present a case study which follows the experiences of a progressive metal band using the patronage-based crowdfunding platform Patreon. It traces how the success of their endeavor gave rise to conflict and tension over its legitimacy in light of persisting late 20<sup>th</sup> century “rock values.” Second, I undertake a political-economic analysis of Patreon as a platform company. I explain how the company makes money and how the work of Patreon fundraisers sustains their business model. Lastly, I examine and contrast these heavy metal fundraisers’ own interpretations of their work using data from interviews. The results indicate that online crowdfunding remains a contested practice among recording artists who still find value and legitimacy in the older “recording contract”-based institutional model. Consequently, they struggle to validate their participation in more entrepreneurial, platform-mediated work.

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# Chapter 1: An Evolving Economic Terrain

## 1. Introduction

### The Case of Ne Obliviscaris

In February 2016, the Australian progressive metal band Ne Obliviscaris launched a crowdfunding campaign via the neo-patronage crowdfunding platform Patreon. Patreon is a subscription service through which creative workers (e.g. artists, YouTubers, musicians, podcasters) enable their fans and supporters to become ongoing, financial “patrons.” In return for their contributions, these “patrons” are often provided ‘perks’—perhaps a phone call or a personal greeting, access to exclusive content (videos or recordings), or backstage access at a live performance. Unlike other single-goal or project-based crowdfunding platforms (e.g. Kickstarter, Indiegogo), Patreon is designed to create financial relationships between artists and patrons over longer periods of time by providing them with a somewhat predictable and stable level of income. While this type of online platform-based patronage is still evolving, it has already worked quite well for a variety of Patreon’s so-called “creators” (Manjoo 2017; Arnold 2017; Biasotti 2017). For a recording artist like Ne Obliviscaris, who perform an extreme form of music for a relatively niche audience, Patreon represents a source of financial support that allowed them to write and perform their music as a full-time occupation, particularly when combined with other revenue streams, such as live performance, royalties and merchandise sales. The opening pitch on Ne Obliviscaris’ Patreon page reflects this transitional and exploratory moment:

[with our Patreon campaign] we want to create an interactive fan experience unlike any band that has come before us. We want to help create a path, not just for Ne Obliviscaris, but for the countless bands across the world that are working incredibly hard, touring the world to perform for their fans and losing money every step of the way. And we want to do it by empowering YOU, the fans, so that you get to decide who succeeds and who doesn't. The old establishment is dying. Let's show that we can create our own new way forward and put the power back where it should be, with the fans who love and believe in the music that we, and so many great bands out there are creating. (Ne Obliviscaris 2016)

In other words, and in their view, Ne Obliviscaris' decision to directly ask their fans for financial support represents a departure—not only from a primary reliance upon late-20<sup>th</sup> century funding models organized around recording advances, royalties and performance income (Passman 2003; Krasilovsky and Shemel 2000)—but also from many of the practices and expectations of rock and metal recording artistry that surround them. This perception of departure is evident in two areas: through the growing use of online platforms that allow recording artists to do the work of production, promotion and distribution *for themselves*; and secondly, through a pervasive and growing entrepreneurial discourse in popular music worlds. Ne Obliviscaris' turn to Patreon is representative of this emerging confluence of entrepreneurial practices and discourse, providing a compelling case through which to examine their impact upon recording artistry specifically and creative work more broadly.

Ne Obliviscaris' case is also remarkable because they appear to be succeeding: from February 2016 (the start date of their campaign) to February of 2020, they received a monthly average of USD\$8353.00 in payments from an average number of 861 patrons, for a total of USD\$409,301.00 in income (Graphtreon 2020).<sup>1</sup> Ne Obliviscaris' Patreon

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<sup>1</sup> These calculations do not include income received during September, October and November of 2019, as there was no data available for this time period.



endeavor is therefore an example of a recording artist on the cusp of a more entrepreneurial horizon—one where established roles and practices in recording artistry are being reconfigured in light of new online platform-mediated opportunities. Despite coming from a niche, marginal music scene in Australia, Ne Obliviscaris are using Patreon to create what appears to be a sustainable model of financial support by tapping into a disparate global audience of dedicated fans, presenting a useful case through which to examine how other artists (marginal, extreme metal, or otherwise) might also finance and sustain their work outside of conventional means and institutions.

### **Push and Pull Factors of Entrepreneurism**

On one hand, there are broader structural changes occurring in post-industrial economies which are pushing workers in the culture and service industries towards these more entrepreneurial roles, practices and positionings. These structural changes are in part the outcome of neoliberal economic and social policies introduced by Western governments and economic institutions since the 1970s (Harvey 2007). As an ideological framework, neoliberalism argues for the restructuring of the state and government in ways which facilitate and secure market imperatives, primarily through the orchestration of policies that promote austerity, deregulation and privatization. In other words, neoliberalism prioritizes the interests of the market, over and above what are perceived as the bureaucratic inefficiencies of liberal-democratic pluralism. It does so by supplanting “political judgement with economic evaluation, including, but not exclusively, the evaluations offered by markets” (Davies 2014: 3). As a “political rationality” of

governance, neoliberalism interprets “the production of all human and institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility” (Brown 2005: 40). This “rationality” also implicates liberal-democratic notions of freedom, which in the language of neoliberalism are rearticulated into something more akin to *market-afforded* rights. In this world, citizens are positioned as autonomous and individuated producers and consumers, who are granted the entrepreneurial “freedom” to maximize their self-interests through the market. As David Harvey notes (citing Karl Polanyi), the “idea of freedom ‘thus degenerates into a mere advocacy of free enterprise’” (Harvey 2007:37). Entrepreneurism is identified as an expression of this type of neoliberal-molded, enterprise-driven interpretation of freedom.

On the other hand, there are structural changes occurring in the music industries that are also pushing recording artists towards more entrepreneurial roles and orientations. For example, traditional revenue from unit sales (e.g. compact discs and digital downloads) continues to shrink (Christman 2016, Hassan 2016), while the royalty rates for recording artists and songwriters from music streaming services remain relatively stagnant, despite the rapid growth and capitalization of the services themselves (Houghton 2017; Sanchez 2017; Marshall 2015).<sup>2</sup> There are also fewer institutional support opportunities, as record labels are spending less time and money on the long-term development of recording artists.<sup>3</sup> Record labels of all sizes are now competing within an

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<sup>2</sup> Streaming services (e.g. Spotify, Google Play, Apple music) are now the dominant means of music consumption in the modern era (IFPI Global Music Report 2017:16). As of April 2020, Spotify alone boasted 130 million premium subscribers and €1.85bn in quarterly revenue (Benedik 2017)—despite having yet to turn a profit (Ingham 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Under the previous regime, “a new artist signed to a major record label was able to learn and evolve during at least two full-length albums. Now, the demands on the new talents have changed quite considerably. Never has the old adage ‘you are only as good as your last recording’ ever been more true than today” (Wikström 2009: 128-29). According to John Williamson: “In the absence of such expertise within the record companies, a greater burden has been placed on artists and their managers

internet-driven consumption market that is much more accelerated, ubiquitous and synergized than it was during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Leyshon et al. 2005:183-85). As Leslie Meier describes, record labels responded by becoming more like “diversified marketing-oriented companies,” as they turn away from a concentration on selling music as a ‘thing’ to focus more on music licensing and synching, as well as artist merchandising and branding:

While the shift away from the CD would seem to signal the loosening of major record company dominance, these companies ceased discussing how they might stop the digital juggernaut and took decisive action to ensure that they would adapt to and profit from new commercial opportunities: they reinvented themselves as diversified marketing-oriented companies that sell artist-brands (Meier 2017: 83).

In this market-context, recording artists are facing a much more flexible and deinstitutionalized set of working practices than they were even ten years ago. There is an increased expectation that they should not only be performers and songwriters, but actively engaged in the more entrepreneurial work of marketing, promoting and branding themselves across a variety of platforms, media and markets. From the perspective of music companies and other mediators, value is now perceived as something derived from *all* aspects of a recording artist’s work. This is evident in the increased adoption of ‘360

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to not only guide and administer their careers but also to facilitate, among other things, the organization and release of recordings; raising funds for recording and touring; the production of videos and artwork and executing marketing campaigns, all of which would have previously been done in conjunction with specific record company departments” (Williamson 2016: 89). And further emphasized by Grierson and Kimpel: “Historically, artists were extended multiple opportunities to build their credibility, discover a market for their music, and ultimately emerge into the general consciousness. Those days are no longer. Now, it is more often independent artists and independent labels that create their own buzz, using much smaller budgets, recording, marketing, and publicizing music, and who consequently then generate a demand for the artist’s work” (Grierson and Kimpel 2009: xxix).

deals,' which allow companies to recoup advances from previously off-limits artist revenue streams (e.g. live performance and merchandising) (Meier 2017: 75-77; Anderson 2014:156; Stahl and Meier 2012), as well as in the explosive number of online platforms (e.g. Patreon, Music Vine, Spotify, Tunecore) which profit from providing meditation services (e.g. finance, promotion, licensing and distribution) (Anderson 166-67).

From the perspective of recording artists, there is also an alluring 'pull' to entrepreneurship, because it so effectively reinforces and accentuates "the individualism of popular music's conventional forms of authorial expression" (Stahl 2015: 144). These "conventional forms" are especially concentrated in rock recording artistry; as Frith notes, the "rock profession is based on a highly individualistic, competitive approach to music, an approach rooted in ambition and free enterprise" (Frith 1981:78). Consequently, entrepreneurship presents a captivating option for aspiring recording artists; it works upon already-existing expectations of self-sacrifice, dues-paying, and promoting oneself in order to stand out from the mass of other aspiring recording artists. It also appeals to recording artists' innate desire for more creative autonomy and artistic freedom, because it appears to offer a set of empowering practices and tools through which they might better control the economic terms and conditions of their professional work.

However, while entrepreneurship reinforces the appeal of creative autonomy, it complicates the perception of recording artist *authenticity*. In other words, in order for recording artists to resonate with their audience as creators of authentic music, they must appear untainted by market and commercial priorities. This gives rise to a contradiction:

as recording artists take on more entrepreneurial positions, they are also engaging in more overtly self-commercializing practices that may potentially compromise their artistic integrity in the eyes of their audience. Authenticity is a historic, prevailing concern in the discourse of rock recording artistry; it acts “as a criterion of judgement in rock's evaluations of music and musicians,” as well as “a value that coordinates a whole series of calculations of cultural worth, and its foundation is an insistence upon the integrity of the individual self” (Keightley 2001:132). From the perspective of the audience, authenticity confirms the romantic perception of recording artists as independent and inspired individuals, creating music within ostensibly unmediated and aesthetically pure conditions, free from corporate interference (Keightley 2001: 133; Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2014: 95-96). In other words, there is a cultural expectation that they reflect an authentic “inner truth,” expressed through their dedication, sincerity and commitment to creating artistic works, above and beyond their commercial potential (Regev 1994: 86). While the notion of authenticity is somewhat abstract, it nevertheless factors heavily in cultural perceptions of the economic value of music.

To become “authentic” also represents a kind of transcendence—not just from the drudgery of everyday work but from the *alienation* that underlies it. From a Marxian perspective, individuals engaging work in capitalist production processes are alienated on two levels: on one hand, they are materially alienated from the objects they produce; specifically, they do not produce goods *for themselves*, but rather engage in exploitative production relations in producing commodities for the market. On the other, they are also alienated from themselves in “the *act of production*, within the *producing activity* itself” (Marx 1967: 110). In other words, when they are compelled by necessity to engage in

undesirable and/or involuntary labor, they encounter the “active alienation” of commodity production. Consequently, labor is not engaged for “the satisfaction of a need; [but rather] a means to satisfy needs external to it...the worker’s activity [is] not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self” (Marx 1967: 111).

Concerning this more “active” type of alienation, the degree or extent to which it is experienced then varies across different labor processes and occupations. In the context of Fordist factory production regimes, Blauner (1964) found that interpretations of alienated work were often variable and “unequally distributed” depending on the type of industry (e.g. automobile, printing, oil refining) and that experiences of contentment or unhappiness shifted according to an individual’s specific work practices, context or organization. Likewise, notions of “active alienation” are further complicated in post-Fordist labor processes which often afford workers more control over conception and execution in the creation of cultural objects. In particular, creative workers—like for example recording artists (Toynbee 2000), animators (Stahl 2010) or freelance writers (Cohen 2012)—may not interpret their work experiences as “alienating” to the same degree as coal miners or textile workers, because they still retain degrees of relative autonomy over their labor processes (even if they may remain alienated in the “material-legal” sense from the end-ownership of their creative works) (Stahl 2010: 283-84).

This specific type of freedom changes the degree to which individual creative workers might subjectively experience the conditions of their work, and complicates more orthodox perceptions of degradation under monopoly capitalism as a broad, uniform condition. In the music industries specifically, alienation may also be experienced to varying degrees, as the benefits of creative autonomy are contrasted with

precarious working conditions and the historically harsh contractual terms of corporate mediators. Consequently, questions surrounding the nature and importance of recording artists' autonomy, authenticity and alienation are being dragged to the surface as they entrepreneurize and engage audiences far more directly than they did in the past —and not without tension and controversy.

### **Entrepreneurism and Recording Artistry**

Composers and musicians since the middle ages have employed entrepreneurial or “opportunistic” methods and practices in order to secure income and reach an audience (Weber 2004: 5). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, entrepreneurism evolved in the form of freelance work in the popular music industries. Examples extend from Benny Goodman (Collier 1989), to Dave Clark (Perone 2009) to Al Kooper (Kooper 2008), who each in their own way sought out income and opportunity from a variety of revenue streams (e.g. TV contracts, the securing of publishing rights, studio recording work, and producing). However, these types of extracurricular practices more resembled a set of entrepreneurial *tactics*, rather than something which was ever coequal with their status as professional musicians or recording artists. In other words, entrepreneurism never challenged the underlying expectations and perceptions of what it meant to be a recording artist or a professional musician; it was more the exception rather than the rule. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, even as some artists started adopting more semi-entrepreneurial, ‘DIY’ (do-it-yourself) practices in an attempt to build an independent alternative to the major labels’ consolidation of power (Hesmondhalgh 1997), entrepreneurism remained more the

province of ambitious, market-driven individuals, than a defining, pervasive attribute of recording artistry.<sup>4</sup>

However, since the turn of the century, a number of new online platform-mediators emerged in the context of the digital music economy, offering a wide variety of services and tools for recording artists to produce, distribute, promote and make money from their music (Anderson 2014). These online mediators are primarily technology companies, driven by an accumulation logic of acquiring venture capital, making and monopolizing specific markets and extracting rent and/or realizing surplus value from mediating the online interactions and exchanges of networked producers and consumers. As corporate actors situated in the wider economic terrain of “platform capitalism” (Srnieck 2017; Cole 2017; Langley and Leyshon 2017a; Lobo 2014), these technology companies now represent powerful institutional mediators in the music industries. In many cases, they govern the material conditions according to which recording artists and others engaging creative work are able to access resources, audiences and income in the digital music economy. Consequently, the platform company’s role as a mediator situated *between* producers and consumers reinforces and confirms the external, individuated and fully autonomous status of recording artists. This status then confirms the expectation that recording artists take on more entrepreneurial and market-oriented roles as an occupational necessity of making money in the platform-mediated digital music economy. Recording artists then encounter economic and legal conditions in the platform

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<sup>4</sup> These ‘DIY’ practices were most clearly represented in the post-punk and hardcore music scenes during the 1980s, when recording artists began to more actively self-release their own albums, book their own tours and start their own record labels (Blush 2010; Waksman 2009; Azerrad 2001).



relation which constitute them as enterprising subjects, and as such acquire all the requisite burdens, duties and freedoms of an entrepreneurial livelihood.

In contemporary music industries' discourse, recording artists are often exhorted to think of themselves as simultaneously creative and entrepreneurial subjects, placing entrepreneurship at the center of artistic identity (Moore 2016; Tessler and Flynn 2016; Bröckling 2016; Chapman 2013). The entrepreneurial subject is someone who reflexively adapts themselves (their behavior, habits and practices) to the requirements and demands of market-oriented priorities and conditions. In the case of aspiring or professional recording artists, they prioritize their "entrepreneurial selves" as a kind of "mission statement" through which they interact with the market and internalize its values, burdens and responsibilities (Bröckling 2016: xi). The necessity to be entrepreneurial is also proclaimed and normalized on music business-centric websites such as Hypebot (Mastrogiacomo 2020; Noble 2018), DIY Musician (Robley 2014) and Music Think Tank (Nelson 2016, Kusek 2014), as well as through a vast and ever-growing number of 'how to make it in the new music business' texts that target aspiring recording artists (Rabideau 2018; Herstand 2016; Cannon and Thomas 2015). It is also evident in the literature produced by educational institutions like the Berklee College of Music, who state that "making music and running an entrepreneurial career are dual roles now required of today's artists" (Jenson 2016).

One recent study by Dumbreck and McPherson (2016) highlights this entrepreneurial turn. Their analysis relies on interviews with self-described entrepreneurs and others working across a variety of music industries sectors, providing a lens into the various ways through which musicians and recording artists are being drawn into more

entrepreneurial positionings. Notably, they conclude that there is a “trend which would appear to indicate that those who are actively constructing a music business or project do tend to believe that an entrepreneurial mindset has significant value” (Dumbreck and McPherson 2016: 292). This is further reiterated in a later chapter contributed by Tessler and Flynn, where they declare that the “digital marketplace has, in effect, required all aspiring artists to become entrepreneurial start-up businesses” (Tessler and Flynn 2016:56). They then go on to characterize entrepreneurship as an “opportunity” that comes with “responsibility”:

The entrepreneurial opportunity independent artists have to add value to their projects and careers, comes with the responsibility of using digital platforms effectively and advantageously (Tessler and Flynn 2016: 60).

And even as an inevitability:

However, as the only way to capitalize upon their songs and performances is to seek to profit from opportunities replete with risk, they have little choice but to be entrepreneurial (Tessler and Flynn 2016: 68)

This need to adopt an “entrepreneurial mindset” is predominant throughout Dumbreck and McPherson’s research, summed up by their suggestion that “emerging music professionals need an entrepreneurial spirit,” and that “they need to think like an entrepreneur (even if some don’t like the term) to sustain a career in the diverse fields of the music industries” (Dumbreck and McPherson 2016: 3). What is notable about this statement is the caveat “even if some don’t like the term.” This reveals the concern some recording artists have with such objectively market-oriented self-designations, especially as their entrepreneurial responsibilities increasingly encroach upon their primary interest: writing and performing music. More specifically, this calls attention to the notion of

authenticity outlined above, because when a recording artist identifies as an entrepreneur, it connotes a more enterprise-driven, *commercial* purpose to one's work (rather than a creative one).<sup>5</sup> Tensions then arise between the recording artist's desire for authenticity and creative autonomy, and the imperative to be more overtly entrepreneurial and market-oriented. The result is a schism between the artist's professional and artistic identities, which is then amplified as the artist takes on more tasks which conflict with their primary work of creating and performing music:

. . .the opportunities to connect directly with fans/consumers places expectations upon musicians historically beyond their purview. . . Developing each new non-musical skill potentially distracts musicians from focusing on their core competencies of writing and performing music. (Tessler and Flynn 2016: 56-57)

In other words, the need or requirement to be entrepreneurial complicates many of the conventional expectations and interpretations of recording artist autonomy, authenticity and institutional positioning, particularly as “artists are increasingly burdened with the business of music at the expense of making it” (Tessler and Flynn 2016: 67). The spread of entrepreneurship is therefore indicative of a broader reconfiguration of recording artistry's late-20<sup>th</sup> institutional formations and characteristics, as well as representing a potential new fault line in the ongoing struggle between art and commerce (Ryan 1992).

## 1.2 Research Questions

The confluence of recording artistry, online platforms and entrepreneurship

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<sup>5</sup> Notably, Dumbreck and McPherson also discovered in their research that the title ‘entrepreneur’ carries different connotations based on culture and territory, as for example in the United States where the term is understood more positively than in the UK (where it was viewed with much more suspicion) (Dumbreck and McPherson 2016: 295-97)

therefore raises some important questions for scholarly investigation—especially when considering the apparently successful case of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon: if recording artists are increasingly engaging in more entrepreneurial practices in order to survive and maintain an occupation, what does this mean for their persisting expectations and experiences of creative, financial and institutional autonomy, if it also invites more precarious, multifaceted and/or dependent engagements with technology company-mediators (e.g. Patreon)? More specifically, how are recording artists squaring their innate desire to be authentic and autonomous creators with the tensions and contradictions that these entrepreneurial positionings are introducing?

When Ne Obliviscaris embraced the Patreon model they indirectly attached themselves to this emerging entrepreneurial expression of recording artistry; in doing so, they are also attaching themselves to roles, practices and goal orientations quite different from what is conventionally expected from recording artists. If recording artists are increasingly expected to be *both* fully creative and entrepreneurial subjects, how do they reconcile this entrepreneurial imperative with many of the long-held expectations of recording artistry and the institutional practices that surround them? In other words, how do these artists harmonize or resolve expectations rooted in a disappearing institutional model with developing norms of entrepreneurial subjecthood? Moreover, if recording artists are increasingly turning to online platforms in order to develop new revenue streams and opportunities, in what ways might this reconfigure many of the conventional practices and relations between the recording artist, the audience and the record label?

This dissertation explores these questions in order to illuminate the institutional consequences of recording artist entrepreneurship. The case of Ne Obliviscaris and

Patreon is identified as a key example in the research, because it draws into relief the underlying tensions, contradictions and changes unleashed by the emerging imperative for recording artists to become more entrepreneurial subjects. The case of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon provides an entry point through which to explore these questions; on one hand, it represents a ‘real-life’ source of “concrete, context dependent knowledge” through which to situate and analyze the various relations and subject positions introduced by entrepreneurship (Flyvbjerg: 2001: 72). On the other, it is also a case through which to work through a reevaluation of what constitutes recording artistry in light of the turn towards more entrepreneurial practices. Furthermore, it is hoped that the research will also advance existing knowledge in the fields of popular music studies and the culture industries, as well as studies on creative labor and the changing dynamics of work, dependency and empowerment in post-industrial capitalism. The goal is to advance research that invites a better understanding of how the practice of recording artistry is changing in light of new production relations, orientations and expectations, and how recording artists themselves are experiencing these changes in the context of actual practices.

### **1.3 Key Concepts**

#### **Institutional Autonomy**

In developing a framework through which to approach and examine these questions, this dissertation utilizes concepts introduced by Jason Toynbee (2000). Specifically, the concept of *institutional autonomy* and the institutional category of the

*proto-market* are both reassessed in light of the increased entrepreneurization of recording artistry outlined above. Institutional autonomy is the “tendency for the music industries to cede control of production (writing, performing, realizing) to the musicians themselves,” thereby establishing “the terms and conditions for the creative agency of musicians” (Toynbee 2000: 1). In other words, because recording artists effectively control the means of production (embodied in their ability to write and perform music), corporate mediators are compelled to extend a degree of autonomy to them in the music-making labor process. Within the late-20<sup>th</sup> century music industries regime, recording artists exercised their creative capacities through a relatively autonomous relation with a record label, allowing them to develop occupations and careers within a stable institutional-legal structure. Despite the existence of exploitative and exclusionary practices (Stahl 2015; Garafalo 2002; Albin 1997) and a high rate of failure (Jones 2003, Negus 1999:32), many recording artists established a creative space to do what they do best: write and perform music.

Autonomy is also derived from the highly public practice of recording artistry. Through their music, performance and image, recording artists have the power to establish authentic, meaningful connections with audiences. A recording artist is described as “a performer who is ‘signed’ to an exclusive recording contract, and whose job mainly involves the production and promotion of recordings” (Stahl 2015: 143).

More specifically:

While the term [recording artist] refers generally to performers signed to record companies, the category encompasses a wide range of statuses. These include multimillion-selling baby-boomer ‘rock aristocra[ts]’ (Negus, 1992, p. 140) like Pink Floyd and the Eagles, fledgling acts signed to ‘major’ labels or their subsidiaries or affiliates, and grassroots performers working with unaffiliated independent labels (who may never

see payments beyond minimal financial support for recording, promotion, and/or touring). (Stahl 2015: 144)

Recording artists often enter into economic and/or contractual relations with a mediator (e.g. a record company) in the course of seeking financial, promotional and distributional support. However, the success of this relation for both parties is usually dependent upon recording artists retaining some semblance of autonomy; in other words, as “named concrete labor,” they must appear to be commercially uncompromised in the eyes of their audience (Ryan 1992: 45). As Mieke explains, the “imprint of the artist must remain visible to the user: the product, even if it is reproduced in thousands of copies, must retain traces of the work of the artist who conceived it” (Mieke 1989: 25-26). Consequently, “unlike in other commodity production, it is difficult to completely separate the author from her work”—because as objects of consumption, recording artists are bound up in the audience’s imagination just as much as they are bound up in the production process itself (Cohen 2012: 145).

Paradoxically, recording artists must then seem “to be (partially) external to the economic system” in order to for them and their music to be marketable as commodities (Toynbee, 2000: 3).<sup>6</sup> This is required to preserve the appearance of authenticity in the eyes of the audience, who attribute value to recording artists and their work based on their status as commercially uncorrupted, creative subjects—despite their implication in capitalist production regimes. The result is an institutionally autonomous space in

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<sup>6</sup> “External” in the sense that the work of recording artists does not occur under the explicit control and supervision of the capitalist—a relation that is in some ways similar to the autonomy originally extended to craft workers prior to industrial capitalism (Marx and Engels 1988: 93). Such autonomy represents one of the reasons why “capitalists have had only limited success in subsuming artists under capital” (Ryan 1992: 114).

production, where recording artists might go about their work free from the direct oversight and control characteristic of more alienated, wage-labor work forms. This also contributes to the appeal of recording artistry as an occupation where one might do creative work on one's own terms and schedule, providing a kind of escape, or "freedom from workaday convention" (Stahl 2015: 135).<sup>7</sup>

Institutional autonomy is also inseparable from the *cult of authorship* which permeates rock recording artistry, particularly in its late-20<sup>th</sup> century incarnation (Toynbee 2000:29). On one hand, the possibility of becoming an exceptional, music making auteur remains seductive for aspiring artists; it resonates with "utopian potentiality" and the possibility of self-transformation (Toynbee 2000: 32). On the other hand, the allure of authorship proved to be a powerful recruitment and conditioning mechanism for record labels, because it "encouraged music makers to acquiesce to 'commercial routines' on the grounds that their creative expression called for, indeed demanded, public recognition." (Toynbee 2000:30). Authorship is what secures institutional autonomy for recording artists; yet contradictorily, it also draws them more deeply into commercial relations in the process of its realization. In other words, the "terms and conditions of authorship" are ultimately realized through the 'visibility of the market,' where recording artists' aspirations for recognition become aligned with the economic interests of record labels (Toynbee 2000:31).

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<sup>7</sup> Simon Frith notes that this type of freedom is "not just a matter of success and glamour." While stardom may have its obvious appeal, it is notable that "even at the most small time level, music making means working in the world of all those people who don't have to get up in the morning for a nine-to-five business. Bohemianism is musicians' natural ideology: the values of leisure-hedonism and style-are elevated above the conventions and routines of normal society" (Frith 1981: 77)



Autonomy in recording artistry is historically characterized as a good thing, because it allows recording artists to harness their capacities as creative subjects in contexts ostensibly free from overt corporate control. However, in the entrepreneurial discourse, autonomy is rearticulated as a form of *self-realization* exercised through market-oriented and commercializing practices. The emergence of this type of entrepreneurial autonomy is a defining characteristic of the neoliberal free market, where everyone is already equally autonomous and responsible for themselves. Autonomy is then experienced as a form of what Lazzarato calls “extreme individualization,” whereby (in this case) the recording artist, as an autonomous entrepreneur, is compelled to continually self-evaluate and calibrate themselves in response to market pressures:

The Post-Fordist system endlessly solicits the individual, who, thanks to his “freedom” and “autonomy,” must continually arbitrate not only between external situations but also himself. The independent worker, whose model has been imported from salaried work, functions like an individual enterprise and must ceaselessly negotiate between his economic “ego” and his “superego,” precisely because he is responsible for his own fate...Isolated by “freedom” itself, the individual is forced to compete not only with others but with himself. The permanent negotiation with oneself is the form of subjectification and control specific to neoliberal societies. (Lazzarato 2015:185-86).

While entrepreneurism becomes the outward expression of autonomy, its inverse is then the dispersal or redirection of risk and responsibility back upon the individual. This effectively serves the interests of corporate mediators (e.g. Patreon), because it marketizes failure by individualizing it and making it the responsibility of the artists themselves.

This also reveals how the entrepreneurial discourse formalizes the precarity of recording artistry by couching it in the positive language of independence and self-actualization. Particularly in light of the receding dominance of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century,

record label-relation, entrepreneurship presents recording artists with a kind of absolute autonomy to go their own way, become a free agent and/or ‘be their own boss.’

Autonomy is recast as an expression of self-reliance; for example, when recording artists are identified as independent, they are often portrayed in the discourse as ambitious, savvy go-getters, capable of navigating a diverse number of mediators, services and revenue streams in the course of molding their entrepreneurial careers.<sup>8</sup> This rhetoric of independence through enterprise is positively reinforced in recent ‘how to make it in the new music economy’ discourse:

Today, your success is largely in your own hands. Forward thinking musicians are acting more and more like entrepreneurs. You are no longer a product for big record labels to sell. You are your own company—and you are the CEO! (Kusek 2014)

However, the difference is that where entrepreneurship was previously an *option* for ambitious recording artists seeking new revenue streams outside the label relation, it is now presented as a *obligation* in the entrepreneurial discourse; in other words, it is the “subtle, but key distinction between being ‘free to’ and the imperative of ‘having to’ create opportunities” which underscores this emerging entrepreneurial mindset (Tessler and Flynn 2016:59). In recording artistry, and cultural work more generally, the autonomy to become more independent and entrepreneurial is not necessarily the same as the autonomy to become more creative and authentic; they each represent different subject orientations with their own terms of fulfillment.

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<sup>8</sup> Such narratives emphasizing “dexterous, virtuosic self-reliance” reinforce entrepreneurship’s hyper-individualistic character, providing a “powerful model of social conduct in which the abstract values of neoliberal selfhood are performatively realised as concrete narratives” (Chapman 2013:453). This is most clearly represented by the case of musician and performance artist Amanda Palmer, whose successful crowdfunding campaigns, self-released albums and active-fan engagement practices embody this entrepreneurial ideal (Flynn and Kulp 2017; Powers 2015)

Ironically, the corollary of this more neoliberal-driven, deinstitutionalized type of freedom is often more tasks, responsibilities and insecurity—much like that found in other creative, freelance and service work forms that cultivate more independent and/or contract-based flexible labor practices (Huws 2014; Neff 2012, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010:11-13).<sup>9</sup> For example, as market-oriented entrepreneurs, recording artists are increasingly expected by record labels to do the work of artist development upon themselves and “to ‘build their brand’ before signing” a recording contract (Meier 2017: 77).<sup>10</sup> This allows record labels—themselves now rebranded as “music companies,” or more specifically, “diversified marketing-oriented companies”—to better exploit talent that is already ripe for the picking (Meier 2017: 83). As Meier explains:

Within the artist-brand era, it is increasingly the case that artist development no longer happens under the roofs of these record labels-*cum*-marketing companies. Rather, major labels expect aspiring artists to establish themselves and to ‘build their brand’ *before* signing...In effect,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Gina Neff identifies “venture labor” in “innovative industries,” whereby “nonentrepreneurs” adopt “entrepreneurial values” and “behave as if they have *ownership* in their companies, even when they are not actual owners” (Neff 2012: 16). Similarly, independent contractors in the so-called “sharing economy” can also be seen as “venture labor,” because while they are often encouraged to take risks and become “micro-entrepreneurs,” the reality is that they have no direct stake in the platforms that profit from them (Kessler 2014). The persistent entrepreneurial narrative that champions the gig economy’s flexibility and autonomy is similar to the “ideologies of economic risk” that Neff identifies, which served to “make risk seem attractive” or even necessary in order to adapt to new workplace realities where a lack of job security is rearticulated as ‘flexibility’ (Neff 2012: 10) For platform technology companies, these workers are networked, variable inputs to be profitably organized by algorithms; however for workers, these platforms often represent a supplemental revenue stream among a constellation of varying revenue streams.

<sup>10</sup> According to recent research by Ardit (2020), the importance of attaining a recording contract still remains a top priority of aspiring artists. He notes that online platforms and digital technologies have not so much as permitted artists to circumvent the label relation as changed the means and dynamics involved in securing an eventual deal. To wit, “[w]hereas aspiring musicians had to play the bar or college fraternity circuit nationally and regionally to gain the attention of record labels in the past, today Artist and Repertoire (A&R) staff pay attention to “the numbers”—an act’s social media following, streams on SoundCloud, etc. This data becomes the prerequisite for signing artists” (Arditi 2020: 12) In other words, digital tools and technologies have streamlined the means through which labels learn about and calculate the potential for artists to be profitable. The data provide a barometer of popularity which helps them determine which artists have already cultivated significant ‘buzz’ and performed most of the promotional groundwork prior to signing a deal.

the major labels have outsourced the work of A&R onto the shoulders of independent and aspiring recording artists (Meier 2017: 77-78)

Once the primary preserve of the label itself, the practice of financing and creating opportunities is increasingly a task that recording artists must handle on their own.

Entrepreneurism then provides a mechanism for corporate mediators to externalize much of the developmental risk back upon recording artists, who as autonomous entrepreneurs must prove not only their creative abilities, but also their adeptness at marketing, social media and self-branding.<sup>11</sup> As one former manager at Epic Records explains:

The truth is while major labels and their scouts are scouring the Web looking for signs of life, the truly committed indie artists are scouring the Web looking for ways to do the dirty, but important, work of artist development on their own. (Rennie 2014)

And is further emphasized in the *Roles, Revenue and Responsibilities* study from the Future of Music Coalition:

The other consequences of this technological change are harder to measure but important nonetheless. Technology has atomized the music industry, and this dispersion of both opportunity and income has meant that musicians are juggling more work, shouldering more risk, and are tasked with more career-management duties—often for lower rates than before... The artist as entrepreneur is now not only possible, but almost a prerequisite. (Thomson 2013)

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<sup>11</sup> The entrepreneurial practices of musicians also appear as a form of what Alison Hearn (2008) identified as “self-branding,” whereby, as a strategy of survival, workers “purposefully” reconfigure themselves into positions which open themselves up more to market prioritizations and pressures. While the recording artist has long been aware of the importance of accentuating and marketing their public image and artistic ‘self’ as a corollary to promoting albums, these types of practices ‘of and upon the self’ take on more urgency in the context of the entrepreneurism.

In light of these “consequences,” the work of artist development is collapsed into a number of entrepreneurial responsibilities and tasks which complicate recording artists’ status as creative subjects and increase their dependency upon a new cadre of corporate mediators and gatekeepers (Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2014). According to Thomson (2013), this illuminates the push and pull between entrepreneurship and creativity:

It is also important to recognize the tough decisions that emerging artists face. How much of their valuable time do they spend on their craft, and how much do they spend accounting for micropayments, geo-targeting their fans, or ensuring that their album’s metadata are in order? When can they afford to hire someone to help them? (Thomson 2013: 523)

In other words, when a recording artist “becomes” entrepreneurial, it impacts what it means for them to be a creative subject; an increase in the former does not necessarily extend or improve the latter. Recording artists who spend time attending to fundraising, promoting and bookkeeping are therefore making demands on their time and energy which can conflict with their creative activities. As one subject orientation attends to commercial imperatives and the other to creative fulfillment, they must each then find space to coexist in the occupational lives and identities of recording artists.

The differences between these two clashing interpretations of autonomy are central to the analysis which follows, particularly because it reveals entrepreneurship to be more than a business philosophy or a set of practices: it is also way of *orienting the self*. Recording artists become entrepreneurial subjects when they modify their creative selves in order to make room for more overtly-commercializing, market-oriented positionings. As outlined above, the recording artist is now more “free” than ever to seek new revenue streams and engage with a variety of corporate mediators outside of the traditional record label relation—and increasingly more out of necessity than by choice

(Thomson 2013: 515). As these entrepreneurial elicitations and pressures grow, notions like “institutional autonomy” become reconfigured and merged with a more market-oriented, neoliberal definition of freedom.<sup>12</sup> In the case of the music industries, this type of freedom is then articulated in ways which target and appeal to recording artists’ innate desire for creative and financial autonomy.

### **Music Proto-Markets**

Another conceptual category central to this dissertation and the development of institutional autonomy is the music *proto-market*. Proto-markets are where recording artists first encounter the norms, expectations and practices of the broader music industries market they aspire to enter. According to Jason Toynbee, they are where the “performer and audience” are brought together “in arenas which are not fully commodified.” (Toynbee 2000: 27). They are spaces both territorial (e.g. nightclubs, music shops, rehearsal rooms) as well as increasingly virtual (e.g. online music-sharing and promotional platforms). They are where the ideologies and practices of what generally constitutes recording artistry are first encountered and internalized. In short, they are where aspiring recording artists first encounter the tensions and contradictions inherent to making money from music.

From the perspective of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century music industries, the “proto-market in all its anarchic voluntarism is extremely difficult to control,” and represents a sphere of inchoate economic activity in constant tension and ambivalence with the more

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<sup>12</sup> This highlights another aspect of neoliberal “freedom”: the freedom to be unemployed, or simply find another career (Harvey 2007: 53).

commercialized popular music industries (Toynbee 2000: 27). Proto-markets are where the rules of the game begin to appear in high relief, and more concretely, where labor and capital first encounter each other in organized regimes of production. This resulting tension is expressed in the ways through which both “artists and audiences” in these scenic spaces actively seek to “distinguish themselves from the values associated with the mass market” (Toynbee 2000: 27). This tension also finds its expression in the myriad ways through which some artists cling to residual ideals of belonging to a separate, insular community outside the larger, mainstream music industries. Proto-markets are therefore contested terrain, where aspirations of financial and creative autonomy stand in contrast to the broader reality that these markets actually serve as an important developmental “reservoir” of labor for music companies and record labels (Miege 1989: 30).

However, in light of the changing practices and relations outlined above, the notion that the “proto-market in all its anarchic voluntarism is extremely difficult to control” is called into question—especially when even the most seemingly independent, ‘DIY’ proto-market practices are now increasingly mediated through technology companies. For example, if Facebook is used as the primary tool for promoting a local concert in a given proto-market (often as an “event” page), and the tickets are sold online through a multi-million dollar platform like Eventbrite, and the show is marketed and promoted on Twitter and through applications like BandsInTown, we can see that what ostensibly appears to be a ‘do-it-yourself’ endeavor is undertaken primarily using the tools of corporate mediators. Proto-markets, perhaps once “unassimilable to the firm and its regularized discipline of accumulation,” are now the deterritorialized targets of online

platform and technology companies (Toynbee 2000:27). If at one point local and niche music proto-markets were “not fully commodified,” they are now being drawn into more capital-intensive and corporately-mediated accumulation frameworks through the necessity of using these types of services (Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2014: 103-06). As is evident in the case of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon, recording artists are seeking out and using these platform companies’ affordances in order to compete for financial opportunities and audiences. Yet in doing so, they are also adopting new, explicitly market-oriented practices and comportments that clash with long-held norms, conventions and expectations of recording artistry.

### **Metal Music Markets**

This dissertation also employs a qualitative analysis of recording artists’ perceptions, practices and experiences in *metal music markets*. These markets—and the proto-markets which support and pollinate them—provide background and analytical context for the case study of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon. They are the economic spaces where metal musicians and recording artists seek to exchange their music-making labor for income and attain professional recognition and legitimation. Metal music markets are where artists like Ne Obliviscaris develop their occupational identities in conjunction with commercial practices and orientations (e.g. selling merchandise, recording and touring). In general, they are the economic spaces where metal music-makers of all varieties—from heavy metal to its more “extreme” variants (e.g. death, doom and black metal)—come into contact with market relations in a globally interconnected, “wider metal scene” (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 22)



Although metal music markets are nearly everywhere, they tend to thrive most in fringe, underground spaces on the margins of the popular music industries. As spaces of petty-capitalist and ‘DIY’ production, they often retain a strong independent spirit, serving as both curators and protectors of scene authenticity. The music in these spaces is often produced and mediated through underground-oriented “informal networks of reciprocity” towards specific audiences, resulting in practices which ensure they maintain “a degree of insulation from global flows of capital” (Kahn-Harris 2007: 96). For example, independent metal record labels remain an established, pervasive institution in these markets, and many are often owned and operated by one person and employ primarily DIY and independent economic practices (e.g. no contract, handshake recording deals). Specifically, they are ‘micro-independents’ who cater to:

. . . every conceivable flavor of musical taste, often to no more than a few hundred aficionados. The smaller enterprises often grow out of local scenes of music making and associated businesses (instrument and record shops, places of entertainment serving as venues etc.) and may not even be legally registered—in much of the world, cultural businesses primarily exist in the “informal economy” (Hesmondhalgh and Meier: 2014: 95)

Their operations and tactics often resemble those of larger labels, albeit on a much smaller scale. They represent a traditional model of support, curation and endorsement for all manner of metal music-makers and their audiences, and much like larger labels, still seek to profit in order to sustain and expand their operations.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> David Hesmondhalgh explores this dynamic through the lens of the post-punk movement’s failed attempt to develop an alternative, independent infrastructure to the mainstream. Through the example of UK indie Rough Trade, he explains that as these labels grew larger and more capitalized, they encountered a contradiction: they could only move forward as ‘independents’ by adhering to “conditions largely determined by the large corporations they were attempting to challenge.” In other words, they were caught between a ‘punk rock’ and a hard place—they were stuck between growing the label and “punk rock’s ambivalence about popularity” (Hesmondhalgh 1997, 271-272). This contradiction is also found in metal music markets, and will be elaborated upon in later chapters.

However, despite the genre's seeming incongruity with more mainstream orientations and goals, metal-music makers still cleave to many of the practices characteristic of late 20<sup>th</sup> century music recording artist professionalization and advancement. For example, they seek to establish a scenic presence over time, they cut demos and perform live for little or no money in the course of paying their dues. Metal music markets also exhibit many of the same economic and legal institutions present in the wider music industries—e.g. record labels, booking agents, touring cycles, recording contracts, royalty payments and so on. Consequently, and despite their fiercely independent character, they are still very much conditioned, shaped and influenced by broader commercial imperatives and market pressures.

Also, and much like their counterparts in other scenes and genres, metal music-makers are experimenting with new platform-mediated financial and promotional opportunities. Many of these opportunities (e.g. online crowdfunding) introduce practices and comportments that are not easily squared with enduring ideological perceptions of rock and metal recording artistry. In other words, they clash with ideals of authenticity and push the boundaries of “acceptable” market-orientations, producing conflict and tension as artists negotiate and reconcile their position in this unfolding dynamic.

The case of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon draws this conflict and tension into relief: on one hand, they represent an artist who arose through the ranks of these metal music markets, eventually securing a recording contract with a major independent label; on the other, they have become economically dependent on an ongoing affiliation with the crowdfunding platform Patreon. As an artist with one foot in the old model, and one in the new, Ne Obliviscaris occupy a liminal, ‘in-between’ space where established and

emerging practices are converging. Despite being signed to record label, Ne Obliviscaris' decision to "entrepreneurize" and run a patronage-based crowdfunding campaign is a potential harbinger of a new model of rock and metal recording artistry. The case of Ne Obliviscaris also embodies the push and pull between conventional metal market practices and expectations, and the emerging reality that in the era of the digital music economy, there may be no more underground proto-markets or "institutionally autonomous" spaces left that are not mediated by some kind of explicit corporate-platform relation.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

The following methods are inspired by Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) argument for a more *phronetic*, value-oriented approach to social science research. Drawing on the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, Flyvbjerg calls for the consideration of ethical questions in the study of social phenomena—or in other words, an "analysis of values — "things that are good or bad for man [*sic*]"—as a point of departure for action" in the study of social phenomena (Flyvbjerg: 2001:57). In contrast to the more instrumental-rational approaches of the natural and applied sciences, phronesis is considered an *ethically practical* method; it considers "ethics in relation to social and political praxis, that is, the relationship you have to society when you act" (Flyvbjerg: 2001:55). This concern with ethics and 'things that are good or bad' for humankind also introduces questions of power relations, and how they might impact a given social phenomena. An ethical line of inquiry therefore focuses "on what is variable, on that which cannot be encapsulated by universal rules, on specific cases;" it is an examination of social

phenomena that considers its context-dependent, variable and contingent circumstances. (Flyvbjerg: 2001:57). Moreover, it is an approach which does not seek to ‘fit’ broad theoretical axioms to specific cases and circumstances—it instead raises questions and deliberates upon a given social phenomenon in order to construct concrete, practical and contextual knowledge about that phenomenon. As Flyvbjerg explains:

. . .the principal objective for social science with a phronetic approach is to carry out analyses and interpretations of the status of values and interests in society aimed at social commentary and social action, i.e. praxis. The point of departure for classical phronetic research can be summarized in the following three value-rational questions: (1) Where are we going? (2) Is this desirable? (3) What should be done? [to which he later adds another:] Who gains and who loses; by which mechanisms of power? (Flyvbjerg: 2001:60)

In this case, questions are raised concerning the practice of recording artistry within the context of the evolving digital music economy and its production relations. A phronetic approach then deliberates upon the values which are introduced, accentuated and reinforced by those production relations. For example, the music industries operate according to their own rationalizations and logics which guide the actions and behavior of the individuals working within its confines, the most principle of which is the logic of capital accumulation. Acknowledging this, a phronetic approach questions the values which underlie and reinforce those rationalizations and logics; or more specifically, it is a method which questions how those rationalizations and logics might exist to serve the interests of some over others.

Following along these lines, this dissertation then employs a ‘two-pronged’ analytical framework: one that considers recording artistry as creative work from an institutional perspective and one that analyzes recording artists as subjects *within* these institutions. While each approach may exhibit its own analytical priorities, levels of

analysis and limitations, they both share a prevailing concern with the relations of power among recording artists and corporate mediators in the context of digital music economy and online platforms. The research framework also employs a case study as a means of applying and working through the data in the context of actual practices. The aim of this combined approach is to provide an account of recording artistry that is attentive to its historical and institutional contexts, yet also accounts for the subjective perspectives and experiences of recording artists. The research is therefore not concerned with a musicological analysis of the stylistic and/or artistic decisions of Patreon users (as there appears no evidence that the crowdfunding model impacts the music itself in any way, nor do artists appear to change their music in order to meet patron preferences); rather, the focus is on the *work of music-making* in the context of platform-mediated opportunities. The research is also supported by qualitative data drawn from literature and texts produced by recording artists, record and technology companies, artist advocacy groups, music industry news sites, as well as scholarly and educational sources. Data is also drawn from a series of first-person, qualitative interviews with recording artists and others relevant to the case study under examination.

In examining the data, a political economy approach focuses primarily on the institutional practices, power relations and occupational status of recording artists working in the context of the contemporary *music industries* and its accumulation imperatives (Jones 2012; Williamson and Cloonan 2007; Toynbee 2000). The second combines discourse analysis with a governmentalist approach to recording artistry in order to illuminate how power works upon recording artists' subjective perceptions, experiences, status and social positioning *within* this context (Stahl 2013; Hesmondhalgh

and Baker 2011; Banks 2007). In the case of the music industries, subject-oriented analysis provides a method of getting ‘under the hood’ of political-economic formations in order to account for the occupational perceptions and experiences of recording artists *within* those formations.<sup>14</sup> I take my lead here from Jason Toynbee’s view that such an approach “compliments rather than contradicts a capital-labour perspective,” by accounting for the contingent, discursive and everyday aspects of the creative labor process which are often sidelined in broad-based political economy approaches (Toynbee 2000:14). This invites an examination of recording artists as active agents in cultural production; or in other words, an examination of recording artists as not just economic inputs, but as complex, creative subjects whose very selves are constituent of the music-making labor process. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) used this approach effectively in recent research on cultural workers in the United Kingdom, providing a lens into how the workers themselves perceive and experience their work. Their analysis focused on what they identify as an “important ‘intermediate’ level” located “between the subjective experiences of workers and the historical and systemic forces structuring those experiences” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011: 77). I find that this “intermediate” approach is also useful in this case, particularly given that recording artists’ subjective experiences are so actively implicated in *both* the production and consumption of music

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<sup>14</sup> Music and cultural industries research that examines or accounts for subjectivity and subjective experience has been marginal. Some notable exceptions include Stahl (2013); Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) and McRobbie (2002), among others. Hesmondhalgh and Baker identified a pervasive “neglect” of subjectivity in the political-economic research of creative work fields, particularly from those who “extol the benefits of creativity and entrepreneurship,” yet tend to sideline or ignore its more negative, exploitative and/or disempowering aspects (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011: 70-71). Banks also identified a “lack of attention paid to the issue of individual subjectivity in the cultural workplace,” particularly in the macro-level political-economic analysis that tends to overemphasize the structural and systemic aspects of the culture industries over and above the experiences and agency of cultural workers (Banks 2007:27). This dissertation seeks to attend to this neglect by foregrounding an analysis of subjectivity *in conjunction* with critical political-economic analysis.

commodities: on one hand, the recording artist's subjectivity is the source of creativity and self-expression; on the other, it is the source of value in music commodities. This duality is what underlies the art-capital relation and the tensions that arise when recording artists seek to realize their creative capacities through market mechanisms.

### **The Case Study**

The case of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon represents a critical, salient issue at the forefront of the contemporary music industries and recording artistry. The value of the case study lies in its ability to provide a deeper, context-centered perspective of how one recording artist is encountering, perceiving and navigating entrepreneurial practices and how those practices are impacting the politics of recording artistry. The intention is to channel analysis through a relatable example that draws out and accentuates the more complex, underlying aspects that might be overlooked in macro and/or quantitative approaches. In other words, a case study framework provides a deeper, holistic examination of the interrelationship of objective conditions and subjective experiences in social phenomena. Cases studies are useful because they “can “close in” on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice.” (Flyvbjerg 2001: 82). As a “real-life case,” Ne Obliviscaris’ Patreon campaign provides an example through which to draw inferences and conclusions about the entrepreneurial perceptions and experiences of recording artists more broadly.

The use of a case study is also rooted in Flyvbjerg’s argument for a more phronetic, value-driven approach to research. Citing Aristotle, Flyvbjerg explains that

“values and human behavior must be seen in relation to the particular,” and that it is through such particulars and the study of specific cases that “concrete, practical and context-dependent knowledge” is ultimately produced (Flyvbjerg: 2001:70). The in-depth examination of a rich case offers insight into human and social experience which is often not attainable through the use of overarching theoretical principles alone; it provides a more “nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule-governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning process” (Flyvbjerg: 2001:72). Rich cases are often representative of a host of overlapping social, political and economic factors, which when strategically chosen, provide a means of connecting specific practices with institutionally defined limits and pressures. In this case, the patronage-based crowdfunding experiences of Ne Obliviscaris can be seen as representative of systemic changes taking place in the music industries more broadly, providing a concrete example through which to explore their connections, interrelations and ethical implications.

Ne Obliviscaris’ encounter with Patreon is therefore considered a *critical* case, or one which exhibits “strategic importance in relation to the general problem” (Flyvbjerg 2001:78). As a recording artist who embraced the online neo-patronage model, Ne Obliviscaris appears to represent a success story which is potentially applicable to understanding other, similar cases. It does so by considering a fundamental question: is this case representative of a new standard, or model through which recording artists might finance their career, or does it represent an anomaly? From a more academic perspective: is this case representative of an emerging set of practices and relations within recording artistry that invite a reevaluation of prevailing analytical concepts (e.g.



authenticity and institutional autonomy)? As a critical case which is generalizable and exemplary of prevailing contemporary conditions and practices, Ne Obliviscaris' encounter with Patreon makes it possible to draw conclusions regarding *if and how* these changes are affecting the recording artistry, as well as the concepts used to explain it.

Despite the value of the case study in these areas, the approach does have limitations. In the context of this dissertation, the case study is inevitably a snapshot; it captures the practices and experiences of one artist working in the context of a still-evolving field of platform companies and its production relations. It can only go so far in explaining how these dynamics might unfold over time and in other contexts with other artists and platform companies. Consequently, it may not be exemplary of the “shape of things to come” or represent a paradigmatic case from which others might be contrasted and evaluated (although it may have the potential to do so as well). What it does do however is concretely demonstrate that these experiences are possible and they are happening; in other words, the world in which Ne Obliviscaris inhabits and the options they are presented with are more or less the same as those encountered by a multitude of other aspiring and professional recording artists. Therefore, the choices, claims and arguments they make have implications which connect this case study to the broader politics of creative work in platform capitalism, as well as examining how the patronage-based crowdfunding model represents a distinctly neoliberal modality of entrepreneurial work.

### **Critical Political-Economic Analysis**

This dissertation uses a critical political-economy approach that positions

recording artists as a category of creative labor working in the context of capitalist cultural production frameworks. A critical approach interprets these production frameworks as riven with contradictions, many of which are specific to the dynamics of control and autonomy that often envelopes the creative labor process and the broader art-capital relation. Bill Ryan identifies this relation as an epochal, ongoing contradiction that continually haunts the relations of artistic-cultural production, even as those relations are reconfigured through time and technological change (Ryan 1992: 41). Recording artistry is positioned as a practice which exemplifies these historical contradictions and places them within the broader context of the music industries. In popular culture, recording artists represent exceptional individuals whose music provides enjoyment in the form of ‘use values’ for millions of people. However, from the standpoint of capital, they are creative workers whose relative control over the means of production presents them with a fundamental valorization problem. This problem extends into the market itself, where the fickle tastes and perceptions of audiences make it difficult to predict what artists and which songs might be successful. As music commodities move from the artist’s imagination to the audience’s ears, recording artists become implicated in *both* spheres: they are simultaneously the wellspring of subjective creativity in production and fetishized objects in cultural consumption.

A critical political economy approach is well-suited for analyzing the diversity and interrelatedness of these production and consumption processes. It offers a holistic approach which sees economic activities as *embedded* and *interconnected* with cultural and political life, rather than something which should be analyzed in and of itself (Hesmondhalgh 2007: 33). Moreover, it also accounts for the (sometimes overlooked)

aspect of the conditions and experiences of creative workers *within* these processes. For recording artists specifically, their subjective insertion into the music-making production process is fundamental: as named concrete labor, they are the source of both use and exchange value which is the driving engine of the music industries. Notably, Bernard Miege (1989) was among the first to articulate the constitutive role of the artist-creator in production. His analysis of the economic logics and contradictions encountered by artists at the “phase of conception” revealed a much more complex set of relations taking place within cultural production processes than was previously considered (Miege 1989: 66-85).<sup>15</sup> It is a central concern of this dissertation to account for and understand these working practices and experiences and the contradictions they introduce—particularly in light of the growth and spread of entrepreneurial practices in recording artistry.

Critical political-economic analysis also turns the spotlight upon the underlying *political* contestations of recording artistry. In other words, an examination of the art-capital relation also gives rise to questions concerning power, ethics and exploitation. Considering this, it is safe to say that there is “no neutral ground” in the work of recording artistry, because power relations are so often a conditioning presence at every level of analysis (Flyvbjerg 2001 61). In the context of the digital music economy and online platforms, power is much more fragmented and dispersed than it was under the previous industrial regime, when it was identified as something located in institutions like record labels, distributors and/or A & R departments. In other words, when corporations like Patreon are presenting themselves more like partners who want to keep “power in the

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<sup>15</sup> Prior to Miege’s contribution, the roles and experiences of artists and artistic creativity was often an omitted, or sidelined aspect in (what were primarily) industrial, strategic and macroeconomic-focused analyses of cultural production (Hesmondhalgh 2007:35)

hands of creators,” power itself appears to retreat behind what are ostensibly mutually agreeable relations (MacBride 2017). This dissertation seeks to peel back the layers of hyperbole which often cover up these underlying power relations, in order to reveal how they contribute to broader narratives of recording artist entrepreneurship.

A first step towards explaining these power relations is to interpret recording artists as not just anonymous economic inputs, but as active human subjects. This approach takes its lead from Golding and Murdock’s belief that political-economic analysis should go “beyond technical issues of efficiency to engage with basic moral questions of justice, equity and the public good” (Golding and Murdock 2005:61). This type of inquiry will then necessarily draw upon the perceptions and experiences of individuated recording artists, who often confront corporate mediators from disempowered, unequal positions in the relations of production. Such an approach is also aligned with the phronetic, value-rational mode of inquiry advocated by Flyvbjerg, in that it seeks to illuminate the ethical contradictions recording artists encounter as they become drawn into these relations.

A critical political economy approach is therefore concerned with questions of power, and how power shapes the perceptions, habits and practices of working recording artists. In the context of the music industries, this reveals how recording artists are positioned as “managed subjects,” who despite retaining some relative autonomy, are recruited and integrated into “discursive regimes in which the construction of knowledge and the disposition of power favour their compliance” (Jones 2012: 27-28). These “discursive regimes” provide a persuasive ideological component to the art-capital relation that rationalizes and reinforces the power of corporate mediators. Considering

this, political-economic analysis should not only examine recording artists in the broader context of cultural production, but as *subjects of power* within cultural production. In other words, analysis should not be limited to describing how recording artists work in the context of a given economic relation, it should also ask who benefits from that relation, and under what terms and conditions.

From an institutional perspective, political-economic analysis is useful in explaining how these mechanisms of power generally unfold in the music industries. It provides a set of tools, which when guided by a phronetically-inspired analytical framework, permit a more nuanced consideration of the occupational status of recording artists. Following along these lines, power is interpreted as a process which draws working subjects into rationalized production frameworks through their own actions, rather than something which is embodied in specific structures. In short, it is a way of acknowledging that power is something that is also “constructed and acted out by individuals as ruled enactment” (Ryan 1992: 18). In order to examine how this “ruled enactment” works in actual, practical activity, there is a need for an even more specific, micro-level conceptualization of power. This is where a political-economic analysis of institutions reaches its conceptual horizon, and where analysis moves more concretely towards questions of discourse and subjectivity.

### **Discourse Analysis**

Within the context of the music industries and online platforms, entrepreneurship also appears as a *discourse*; it is comprised of rhetoric, narratives and texts that explicitly

and implicitly communicate to recording artists the type of subjects they *ought* to be, or *should* be, if they want to be successful. I am arguing that this new form of “ought” is in contradiction and tension with the narratives, discourses and structures of feeling of the old regime; it represents a disjuncture between old and new expectations in recording artistry, producing crises in meaning, identity and practices. This “ought” is embodied in the narratives and texts of the entrepreneurial discourse, where they suggest and prescribe modes of conduct which affirm recording artists’ individuated status. On one hand, this approach contextualizes the interconnectivity between entrepreneurial narratives and their roots in material practices. On the other, it provides a method of connecting specific narratives and texts with the broader “order of discourse” (Fairclough 2003:3). In this case, the “order of discourse” is the entrepreneurial imperative which increasingly appears to be the norm in popular music worlds—a discourse which implores recording artists to align their expectations and ambitions with a more explicitly market-oriented self.<sup>16</sup>

Discourse analysis helps to peel back the narratives and texts through which entrepreneurial imperatives are mediated and legitimized; it reveals how rhetoric is tactically employed by music, platform and technology companies as a means of

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<sup>16</sup> Entrepreneurism can also be interpreted as an *axiomatic* expression of capital accumulation. Lazzarato (2015)—borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 461)—employs the term “axiomatics” as a way of describing all the forms through which the logic of capital is “actualized” (e.g. through state and social institutions and practices, consumerism, the credit system etc.). Axioms “define the principles (to repay creditors, increase taxes, cut welfare services, streamline state budgets etc.) from which economic policies and governmentality are derived; they constitute semiotic flows that enter into production in the same way as material flows; they change because axiomatics is, in fact, *a politics that confronts and adapts to changing situations*” (Lazzarato 2015: 147-58). In this sense, the ‘laws of the economy,’ the ‘entrepreneur of the self,’ and the notion of ‘human capital’ are all logical “post-Fordist axiomatics” of neoliberal political economies; they are what ‘goes without saying’ when they become concretized in everyday practices (Lazzarato 2015: 162).

validating entrepreneurial practices and compartments in recording artistry. As Flyvbjerg explains:

In rhetoric, “validity” is established via the mode of communication – for example, eloquence, hidden control, rationalization, charisma, and using dependency relations between participants – rather than through rational arguments concerning the matter at hand. (Flyvbjerg 2001: 94)

In other words, when entrepreneurial rhetoric is successfully employed, it becomes a self-rationalizing instrument of power and class interests and validates norms and practices in accordance with those interests. This compels an analysis of how entrepreneurial narratives and texts are institutionally mediated on one hand, and subjectively interpreted on the other. The entrepreneurial rhetoric works in and through discourse, rendering this kind of subject positioning a normative expectation—one which appears to benefit the individual even as it reinforces capitalist imperatives. To recognize the presence of such rhetorical action in discourse is to acknowledge the realities of this power and its pervasive diffusion in everyday practices.

Entrepreneurial texts are therefore critical sources of data in discourse analysis; they are located in the rhetorical statements, utterances and conversations appearing in social media posts, platform company terms and conditions, online comment threads, newspapers, trade and academic journals, educational websites, advertisements, and so on. The wealth of evidence in this area is considerable because of the very public and socially-networked channels through which recording artists must typically promote themselves. These texts are also found in academic-corporate literature of music schools, like the Berklee College of Music’s Institute for Creative Entrepreneurship and the Manhattan School of Music’s Center for Music Entrepreneurship (who notably offer

“entrepreneurial coaching”) (Manhattan School of Music 2021). On the Patreon platform, it permeates the media the company produces for their blog, as well as *A Creator’s Guide to Patreon* and their “creator University” called *Patreon U*. Entrepreneurism is also espoused on ‘how to make it in the music industry’ advice-blogs like Music Think Tank, as well as in the number of ‘self-help’ texts for aspiring recording artists (Rabideau 2018; Pitfield 2015; Lind and Lind 2015). As a collectivity of discursive texts, they mediate and articulate “the selection of certain structural possibilities and the exclusion of others” (Fairclough 2003: 23). In this case, they legitimize and reinforce the prevailing perception that a successful recording artist is also an entrepreneurial one: self-invested, self-regulating and self-adaptive to market conditions and requirements.

For example, when an esteemed institution like the Berklee College of Music states explicitly that “making music and running an entrepreneurial career are dual roles now required of today’s artists,” they are reinforcing a specific narrative of what should be expected of recording artists entering the music industries (Jenson 2016). Institutional media like these represent a variety of authors and agents who employ language which reinforce and confirm entrepreneurship as a vital, necessary attribute of recording artistry. At the same time, it frames out other endeavors which have no clear market end in commodification. While these entrepreneurial texts may appear abstract and/or neutral, they nevertheless reinforce prevailing economic conditions and power relations in the music industries. In other words, they have “social, political, cognitive, moral and material consequences and effects” on the working lives of recording artists (Fairclough 2003:14). Particularly when they are enveloped in idealized notions of self-empowerment and autonomy, entrepreneurial texts become a self-legitimizing extension of the logic of



individualism. In other words, discourse introduces a “presupposed semantic relation,” that naturalizes entrepreneurship within the broader, structuring context of neoliberal ideology and practices (Fairclough 2003: 130).

The aim is to use discourse analysis to peel back these “material consequences and effects” in order to understand how such entrepreneurial logics and practices are being internalized and reproduced in recording artistry. This entails a critique of what Banks’ calls the “subjectivizing discourses of enterprise,” which are “evidenced, first, in the construction of cultural policy (and other supporting) enterprise discourses and second, in the situated practice of constructing the entrepreneurial, creative self” (Banks 2007: 64). It is through these every day, “situated” practices that aspiring recording artists learn and interpret “what one must do” in order to become a professional. They then become open to more entrepreneurial subject positionings and tactics, “not necessarily because they are forced to, but because they choose to - albeit within a prescribed discursive and practical framework” (Banks 2007: 64). In recording artistry in particular, there are discourses and narratives which have long reinforced the prevailing expectations of “what one must do” in order to become a professional, like for example the need to pay one’s dues and to perform the developmental work of and upon the self prior to ‘getting signed’ by a record label. As creative, yet governed subjects, aspiring artists might then perceive entrepreneurship as a rational, practical means of achieving one’s occupational aspirations.

Discourse analysis is also applied to user-generated data derived from social media platforms. In particular, several public comment ‘threads’ were identified which captured users’ reactions to the case study of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon. These

comments provide a critical window into the unfiltered opinions and views surrounding the band's patronage-fundraising endeavor and the ideological tensions surrounding it. However, while such "publicly" posted data on social media are ostensibly open and accessible to anyone, it remains problematic because one often needs to create a user profile to fully access it. In other words, social media platforms are better interpreted as "quasi-public" fora, where access to data is still managed by corporate gatekeepers and where the boundaries between what is public and private data can be ambiguous (Franzke et al 2019: 7). Recognizing this, I turned to guidelines outlined by Townsend and Wallace (2016) concerning the ethical use of data extracted from social media comments. I then chose to take a more nuanced approach which recognized that such *seemingly* public data should still be tempered by a concern for the privacy of individual users.

In this case, the data was derived primarily from a widely-shared, public discussion featured on one popular recording artist's social media profile. Across several discussion threads, over 300 individual comments provided critical reflections on Ne Obliviscaris' Patreon endeavor. Given the nature of both the platform and the public status of the recording artist, anyone commenting in the discussion would therefore have a "high expectation that (large numbers of) strangers will be viewing their data" (Townsend and Wallace 2016: 14). Additionally, it was determined that the public nature of the discussion and its content did not contain anything sensitive or harmful which might pose any risk to anyone should commentary be used in the research.

Despite these factors, I still chose not to explicitly identify the commenters nor the social media platform from which the data was derived. On one hand, I wanted to provide a layer of privacy should these users' not want their statements associated with

an academic research project now or in the future; on the other, the value of the data did not depend on identifying them or the platform. I also acknowledge that there is the potential that users may *want* their data to be identified. However, I chose to err on the side of protecting these users' identities as some may anticipate a degree of privacy when communicating via these types of fora, even if the platform's operating protocols do not exactly warrant it (Franzke et al 2019: 7).

Analysis then moves beyond a focus on discourse to examine more closely this notion of the governed subject. I turn here to Foucauldian-inspired, governmentality-based approaches, which provide a framework for explaining how recording artists are self-adopting and internalizing these more entrepreneurial modes of self-conduct (Lazzarato 2015; Dean 2009; Foucault 1991; Foucault 1982). In general, governmentalist approaches examine questions of power and its relation to subjectivity; more specifically, they are an examination of how subjects come to consensually align and self-govern their behavior in accordance with the interests of external, regulating forces. It is a focus on power and power relations as they are mediated through normative practices which appear both legitimate and rational—not just as something which is located in formal or coercive institutions, like for example the state, the factory or the military (or in the case of the music industries, a record label, management company or a booking agency) (Gordon 1991: 4).

In the case of recording artistry, a governmentalist approach asks how artists might come to reorient their image, habits, attitudes, practices and values in response to both material and discursive pressures. In the contemporary music industries, these are pressures and imperatives specific to the digital music economy and the “regime of

practices” which underlie and permeate its institutions (Foucault 1991:75). In the current context, these include (but are not limited to) the need to self-market and self-brand and the expectation that recording artists develop themselves prior to recruitment by a record label, or independently in conjunction with online platforms and services. Recording artists are in this sense governed when they encounter the discursive frameworks which reinforce these entrepreneurial orientations and, in turn, “structure the possible field of action” through which they can make choices regarding them (Foucault 1982: 790). To govern oneself is to engage in the continual adjustment of the self, as it is perceived to be in one’s interest and in accordance with the prevailing norms and expectations of a given material-social reality. Particularly in the context of the entrepreneurial discourse, governmentality “convenes a “free” subject who rationally deliberates about alternative courses of action, makes choices, and bears responsibility for the consequences of these choices” (Brown 2005: 42). A governed subject is therefore a free subject; and in this case, recording artists are free to become entrepreneurial—or not.

This is not an interpretation of power as something which coerces recording artists into specific practices or relations; on the contrary, it is a view of power which “presupposes rather than annuls their capacity as agents” (Gordon 1991: 5). Power is exercised through the rationalities that underlie a certain construct of recording artistry—rationalities which outline the necessary practices and subject positions through which creative and financial success might be achieved. Recording artists are then free to engage these practices—to be employed, to sign contracts and/or accept the rules of the game. As free agents, recording artists encounter a “field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized”

(Foucault 1982:790). Because of this apparent freedom to act, power is exercised through the consensual behavior, actions and practices of *willing* subjects. It guides, encourages and directs subjectivity; it does not just simply restrict or suppress it. In other words:

. . . power relations do not always result in a removal of liberty or options available to individuals. On the contrary, power in the sense that Foucault gives to the term could result in an “empowerment” or “responsibilization” of subjects, forcing them to “free” decision making in fields of action. (Lemke 2002: 53)

This is especially relevant to recording artists, because the types of freedom they encounter are so closely aligned with their institutionally autonomous and already highly individuated occupational status. In this case, entrepreneurial discourse works more effectively upon recording artists because it uses the language of autonomy and rearticulates it as an attribute of self-actualization through market-oriented practices. In this world, the freedom to work for oneself and become entrepreneurial is never articulated as a constraint, only a means of self-fulfillment.

Lastly, to govern is not only to structure the field of possibilities through which subject-agents act; it is to also provide their actions with a guiding, “practical-ethical” foundation (Dean 2010:20). For recording artistry, this practical-ethical component is critical to reinforcing the meritocratic belief that success is rewarded to those who have earned it through a combination individual fortitude, talent and paying one’s dues—despite the high rate of failure in the music industries. Entrepreneurism attains its durability as a discursive formation only when recording artists identify it as a viable set of practices and orientations through which they might achieve their goals. As governed subjects, recording artists must first perceive the “specific form of reasoning” that

entrepreneurism articulates, and then adopt an appropriate “telos of action or the adequate means to achieve it.” (Lemke 2002: 53). In other words, for the discourse to effectively resonate and be internalized, the ‘rules of the game’ need to be perceived as ethically valid (even if they are not always fair in reality). The apotheosis of recording artistry during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century reinforces the cultural heft of these rules, especially through the ubiquitous success-story narratives told and retold in countless artist career-retrospective biographies, Rolling Stone and “Hall of Fame” tributes, and Behind the Music-type programs.<sup>17</sup> When combined with the allure of institutional autonomy, these success stories seductively reinforce the appeal of recording artistry for aspiring artists of all music genres. Consequently, many of them submit to the terms and conditions of what it takes to become a professional; or in other words, as governed subjects, they willingly do “what must be done” in order to join the ranks of the exceptional.

To summarize, the two-pronged approach outlined above is intended to account for the unique character and positioning of recording artist subjectivity in music industries’ production processes. The intention is to introduce a framework which accommodates both political-economic relations and contexts, as well as the subjective experiences and power relations occurring within them. On one hand, recording artists’ subjectivity is deeply implicated in the creation and marketization of value as named concrete labor; on the other, it is an essential component of the artist’s imagination and expressive capacities, as well as what makes them unique and authentic in the eyes of

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<sup>17</sup> One primary example from the pantheon of rock/pop is Bruce Springsteen, whose oft-celebrated and critically “hyped” blue-collar success story still resonates decades later (Powers 2011). A more recent example is the story of Kelly Clarkson, whose ‘discovery’ on the TV show American Idol and ensuing success reinforces the “narratives of meritocracy” in both the music industries and the broader culture, thus contributing to the belief that anyone can ‘make it’—provided they adhere to established norms of evaluation, judgement and humility (Stahl 2013: 36-63).

audiences. Subjectivity then becomes a value marker, or a distinguishing attribute of recording artistry, which shapes the conditions of authenticity and institutional autonomy, as well as the roles, expectations and goal orientations of recording artists. The two-pronged approach is introduced as a method of examining how recording artists' encounter with entrepreneurship is potentially reconfiguring these roles, expectations and orientations, as well as recording artists' status in the evolving structure of the digital music economy and platform capitalism more broadly.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

This dissertation also draws on qualitative interviews with recording artists using the Patreon platform. The interviews took place in June, 2020 via face-to-face discussions held via online video calls. Each session lasted between one to two hours. Following Brinkmann's (2013) qualitative interview techniques, I employed a semi-structured method centering on roughly 25 opened-ended questions. Given the somewhat sensitive nature of discussing one's occupational and/or financial status, each interviewee was provided the space to engage such topics to the level of their comfortability. The aim was to establish an atmosphere of trust and congeniality in service of the "knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues"—e.g. spontaneous and enlightening divergences, anecdotes and/or insights (Brinkmann 2013: 21). Moreover, I have an inside understanding of these interviewees' occupational status; I am a recording artist with decades of experience working in these same metal markets where I have encountered similar economic and ideological tensions in the course of my work. Although I did not relate this status to the interviewees, this background understanding helped to inform the

conversation and generate rapport.

I chose three primary subjects based on their status as professional recording artists who have used the neo-patronage model to some degree of financial success over a period of at least three years. The first was Tim Charles of the Australian metal band Ne Obliviscaris, who represents perhaps the most financially successful case of any band to ever use Patreon (I/2020 Charles). The second was Riley McShane of the American metal band Allegaeon (pronounced ‘uh-lee-juhn’), who also gained significant income through the platform (though not nearly to the extent as Ne Obliviscaris) (I/2020 McShane). The third was Creston Spires of the American noise rock/metal band Harvey Milk, who as a singer-songwriter secures a modest monthly income from a relatively small group of patrons (I/2020 Spires). By focusing intently on these three respondents, the objective was to draw out and contrast the parallels and divergences among them. More specifically, I wanted to construct an image of the varying ideological interpretations which inform and shape these recording artists’ work in the neo-patronage relation. My aim was to focus on the “different, polyvocal, and sometimes contradictory meanings” these recording artists held concerning their occupational roles, orientations and goals on Patreon (Brinkmann 2013: 21). In sum, these interviews provided important insight into these metal recording artists’ interpretations of their work, giving subjective voice and illuminating the politics of this specific field of platform-mediated creative labor.

## 1.5 Description of Chapters

**Chapter two** examines the case study of Ne Obliviscaris’ encounter and embrace of Patreon. It recounts the band’s journey from being regional recording artists, whose



ambitions to tour the world full-time were muted by limited funding options and geographical constraints inherent to their status as an Australian band. It traces their early efforts at solving this problem by raising capital through the Australian crowdfunding platform Pozible in order to finance a world tour. The success of that endeavor led them to the American neo-patronage platform Patreon, where they sought to secure subscription-based capital infusions in a more ongoing fashion. However, Ne Obliviscaris' announcement of their Patreon endeavor was met with a backlash from other scene members, artists and commenters, who interpreted patronage-crowdfunding as antithetical to orthodox understandings of how recording artists are supposed to “make it” in the music business. To them, Ne Obliviscaris' unconventional appeal to their audience for money (in order to earn a minimum wage), marketing tactics and explicit alignment with a technology company contravened long-standing dues-paying practices and masculine, work ethic values in recording artistry. In response, Ne Obliviscaris argued that Patreon represented a more democratic, transparent and ethical model for artists to make money. To them, it was a more direct and *just* means of remuneration, and one not unlike a membership-based fan or sports club. This chapter traces the tensions and contradictions shaping and expressed in these arguments, showing how new platform-mediated financial opportunities like crowdfunding challenge long-standing values in rock and metal recording artistry.

**Chapter 3** examines the economics and politics of the Patreon platform. Analysis here focuses on Patreon as a rent-seeking technology company typical of platform capitalism and neoliberal post-industrial work regimes. In contrast to celebratory

narratives rooted in California-ideology, platform companies are best understood as *market-making* apparatuses driven by the logic of capital accumulation. On Patreon, fundraisers like Ne Obliviscaris are interpreted as *platform labor* inputs in service of the company's rent-extraction model. As legally constituted independent contractors, they are externalized and outsourced, taking on all the work, burden and risk in the neo-patronage relation. I suggest that far from being simple "matchmakers," rentier platforms like Patreon are very much political-economic entities with concrete, profit-seeking interests. The chapter also examines Patreon's politics. Here I argue that Patreon, like other platform companies, exerts control over its fundraisers by dictating the terms and conditions of patron access, enforced by threat of banishment. Consequently—and despite their apparent liberation from conventional institutions and power structures—the autonomy platform labor attains in this relation has no intrinsic emancipatory *political* value or meaning; it is a form of autonomy predicated on occupational individuation and isolation, rather than any substantial freedom from the obligations and constraints of capital accumulation. The chapter closes with an examination of entrepreneurship as an *axiomatic* expression of the logic and power of finance capital. I suggest that Patreon perpetuates long-standing power disparities in the culture industries by concentrating the burdens of production more squarely upon creative and cultural producers.

**Chapter 4** analyzes interview data to trace subjective experience in the context of the institutions and practices outlined in previous chapters. Focusing on three recording artist-fundraisers, the aim is to illuminate similarities and differences in their occupational rhetoric and justifications of market orientations—how they define good and

bad ways of making money. This approach takes its cue from Groce's (1989) sociological study of local nightclub musicians in two cities in the United States. He found the "rhetoric and ideology" they expressed in talking about their work reflected their self-identification as either "entertainers" (who primarily valued making money) or as "artists" (who primarily valued the creative process). Groce's analysis is then put into dialogue with a recent study from Klein et al (2017) examining how notions of artistic integrity, autonomy and compromise are currently under reevaluation in light of new, digital-era financial opportunities.

The aim is provide a comparative lens through which to triangulate and historicize evolving value-driven tensions in recording artists' work in light of their increased involvement with platform and technology companies. I suggest that in popular music-making, recording artists' ideological interpretations of legitimacy represent fault lines which bend and shift in response to changing production relations. These lines are drawn to the surface whenever recording artists make choices regarding money-making opportunities or confront market-orientations that challenge their self-understood integrity and/or authenticity. The results indicate that online crowdfunding remains an ideologically contested practice among these recording artists as they negotiate and reconcile their fundraising status with persisting late 20<sup>th</sup> century masculinist "rock values." I suggest the cultural and ideological heft of these values poses a problem for heavy metal recording artists who struggle to validate their participation in more entrepreneurial endeavors like online crowdfunding.

## **Chapter 2: “Our Dream Was On Loan”: Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter tells the story of Ne Obliviscaris, a progressive metal band from Australia whose experiences with the online crowdfunding platform Patreon draw into relief a number of the challenges recording artists are facing in the evolving digital music economy. It is a story which takes places at the intersection of recording artistry, music proto-markets, entrepreneurship and online platforms, and follows the band as they confront new practices and relations while trying to earn a living from their music. More specifically, the analysis focuses on Ne Obliviscaris’ experiences as they transitioned from a part-time, regional act into a more full-time, international one. Central to this transition was Ne Obliviscaris’ use of online crowdfunding platforms in order to raise capital directly from their audience; first when they sought capital to finance a world tour by using the Australian crowdfunding platform Pozible, and then later when they sought capital in order to finance their enterprise in a more ongoing fashion through the neo-patronage crowdfunding platform Patreon. Their use of online funding platforms in each of these circumstances was both novel and unconventional; Ne Obliviscaris were engaging in entrepreneurial practices and ideological conflicts previously uncommon in heavy metal recording artistry—and not without tension and contradiction.

Ne Obliviscaris’ funding initiative through the Patreon platform is also a case which reveals how recording artists are not only encountering, but actively embracing new entrepreneurial practices and orientations. On one hand, it is a case which reveals

how neoliberal conditions and entrepreneurial imperatives are impacting and reconfiguring a specific field of creative work; on the other, it is a case which highlights the contradictory and ambiguous roles recording artists are taking on as they engage more controversial entrepreneurial orientations.

These roles were elevated to the surface when Ne Obliviscaris launched their Patreon initiative in March of 2016; more specifically, members of the metal community expressed consternation and/or anger that Ne Obliviscaris' would use the Patreon platform to so openly and directly ask their fans for financial support. Most of the controversy stemmed from Ne Obliviscaris' Patreon "funding goal": they wanted to raise enough money from their fans so that each member of the band might claim the annual equivalent of the *Australian minimum wage* while making the band their full time occupation. To their critics, this unorthodox goal—and the neo-patronage model intended to support it—appeared incongruent with how conventional industry and recording artist practices were "supposed" to work; Ne Obliviscaris' Patreon initiative was clashing with established 'how to make it in the music business' narratives and expectations grounded in late-20<sup>th</sup> century notions of legitimacy, authenticity and dues-paying in the course of pursuing a recording contract (Toynbee 2000:x). These enduring narratives and expectations still greatly inform how recording artists are assessed as worthy of an audience's favor and success (even as the institutional formations which gave rise to them are changing). Consequently, Ne Obliviscaris appeared to be circumventing an expected rite of passage and legitimation in rock and metal recording artistry; according to their critics, *deserving* recording artists should expect to "grind it out like the rest of

us” while waiting for recognition and/or success—not by asking their fans directly for capital and/or a minimum wage (The Artist 2016).

This backlash did not go unnoticed by Ne Obliviscaris; in fact, rather than ignore it, they chose instead to confront their critics and argue their case for the neo-patronage relation more intensively through social media, as well as in interviews, podcasts and music conference presentations (Holder 2018; Ne Obliviscaris 2017; Charles 2016a; Charles 2016b; Ne Obliviscaris 2016b). Through carefully worded statements—most principally authored and/or voiced by band leader Tim Charles—Ne Obliviscaris began to spin their own positive narrative concerning Patreon and the neo-patronage relation in an attempt to legitimize the endeavor to their audience and prospective patrons.

Ultimately, this more open alignment with the Patreon model was a turning point in Ne Obliviscaris’ occupational lives. As their advocacy for the Patreon platform increased, they also began to express ideological orientations uncharacteristic of metal recording artists and increasingly ambiguous and contradictory positionings vis-à-vis their audience. In the context of the neo-patronage model, Ne Obliviscaris were no longer just recording artists, they were also Patreon “creators” with a stake in the platform’s ongoing success. As a consequence of this dual positioning, they began to take on more explicit market-oriented roles and entrepreneurial practices. At the same time, their audience was also being repositioned—not only into patrons, but as a collective, into something more akin to employers, investors or stakeholders. How Ne Obliviscaris worked to reconcile these contradictory orientations and positionings—and how they also inform ongoing roles and practices in rock and metal recording artistry—is therefore a central concern of this chapter.

Considering these themes and issues, this chapter will unfold in three parts: the first will examine the experiences which led Ne Obliviscaris to use these crowdfunding platforms, as well as the economic pressures which led them to eventually seek financial assistance through the Patreon platform. The second part then analyzes what happened *after* Ne Obliviscaris launched their Patreon initiative; it recounts in detail the subsequent criticism the band received, as well as how that criticism was shaped and guided by ideologically-infused perceptions of professionalization and advancement in rock and metal recording artistry. More specifically, Ne Obliviscaris' critics used rhetoric which appealed to the neoliberal logic and morality of competitive individualism; in their view, it is the responsibility of each individual (in this case, recording artists) to 'make it', excel and be recognized according to the unwritten rules and values of rock recording artistry—something which the band's critics believed that the neo-patronage funding model contradicted. These unwritten rules were primarily based on a value-rational "work ethic" principle (Weeks 2011)—one which finds its most concrete expression in rock and metal recording artistry through the expectation and practice of "dues-paying." Moreover, the criticism was also shaped by its gendered overtones, or the prevailing assumption that the making and doing of rock and metal recording artistry was essentially "men's work." In this perspective, crowdfunding is a *subordinate* undertaking; it lacks the self-defining or self-actualizing characteristics that appear inherent to, for example, masculine, manual work. To these critics, Ne Obliviscaris' Patreon endeavor was perceived as a kind of unmanly activity; Ne Obliviscaris were choosing the seemingly easy, secretarial work of crowdfunding in order to avoid the more difficult, legitimate and

authentic dues-paying labor necessary for establishing themselves as professional recording artists.

The third section of this chapter then analyzes Ne Obliviscaris' response to this backlash, as outlined through a series of arguments and claims made by the band in the subsequent months after the launch of their Patreon endeavor. These arguments and/or claims were founded on four key propositions intended to counter the negative criticism the band received, as well as convince prospective patrons to sign up and join their funding initiative: namely, that the Patreon model is a 'good thing' because it is 1) more *transparent*, 2) more *democratic* and 3) a more *ethical* means of remunerating recording artists. Moreover, they argue that Patreon is not unlike already-existing funding models—the most prominent example being that of 4) *fan-funded sports teams*. I argue that these propositions have a didactic purpose; they were employed as a means of rationalizing, normalizing and consequently legitimizing the patronage relation as a practical endeavor to skeptics and prospective patrons alike. However, they also contain their own ideological inferences and assumptions which reveal Ne Obliviscaris' contradictory status as *both* a recording artist and a capital-seeking, entrepreneurial entity. In other words, as Ne Obliviscaris sought income stability in the form of a minimum wage through an ongoing, direct financial engagement with their audience, they also took on ideological orientations more fully congruent with those of a business than those of an artist.

The story of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon represents what Flyvbjerg would call a *critical case* (Flyvbjerg 2001: 78). On one hand, it is a case whose attributes and features strategically highlight how recording artists—as creative workers—are entering



uncharted economic territory in the course of adjusting and adapting to neoliberal-driven, entrepreneurial imperatives in the context of “platform capitalism” (Srnieck 2017; Cole 2017; Langley and Leyshon 2017a; Lobo 2014). On the other, it is a case which reveals how late-20th century norms and practices of recording artistry legitimation are clashing with the pressures and expectations introduced by these 21<sup>st</sup> century work formations—and those of crowdfunding platforms in particular. Considering these themes, this chapter develops the thesis that recording artists are not only taking on more entrepreneurial practices, but becoming entrepreneurial subjects in new and often controversial ways. Conventional practices and relations of rock and metal recording artistry are therefore revealed to be in transformation and/or reconfiguration, as are the analytical frames through which recording artistry is more widely interpreted and understood.

## **2.2 Rise to Notoriety**

Ne Obliviscaris, or ‘NeO’ for short, are a progressive extreme metal band from Australia who formed in 2003. The band, whose name in Latin means “forget not,” first gained attention through their live performances in and around their hometown of Melbourne. Once they completed their first demonstration recording (*The Aurora Veil* in 2007), they started spreading their music online, eventually gaining a wider national and international following. As the band describes it:

NeO first built an underground following across the world in large part due to the benefits of file sharing, torrents, YouTube and the internet in general. We didn't have a huge label spending tens of thousands of dollars trying to make us the next big thing; it was a grass roots thing... Fans discovered us, told their friends, discussed NeO on forums; they shared

our music with each other and helped spread our music to more and more people over time. (Ne Obliviscaris 2016).

In other words, Ne Obliviscaris are a band who evolved and rose to notoriety in the context of the digital music economy and its media formations. When like-minded fans shared and spread their music across virtual, online music communities, the resulting “buzz” generated for the band allowed them to build a global following far outside of their hometown of Melbourne.<sup>18</sup> The waves they were making in these online music communities was notable; the band eventually signed a recording contract with a small Italian label, who in 2012 released their debut album *Portal of I*. One review of *Portal of I* calls it “the perfect metal album” (Cerami 2012), and one of the album’s tracks (*And Plague Flowers the Kaleidoscope*) was even added to the teaching curriculum at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (Blabbermouth.net 2013). The band then released their second album *Citadel* in 2014 through the French independent label Season of Mist, who provided them with even more promotion and distribution in Europe and North America. This album was also well received, with one reviewer hailing *Citadel* as a “model of efficient and purposeful composition” from “one of the very best up and coming progressive metal bands in the world today” (Smith 2014).

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<sup>18</sup> These online communities are critical to the development and maintenance of marginal music genres such as extreme metal. Across a disparate, international network of fans, recording artists can build a durable fanbase without ever leaving their local area. These online networks are critical to acts like Ne Obliviscaris because they provide access to wider and potentially more receptive audiences (especially for their extreme brand of music). This phenomenon is outlined most clearly by Anderson: “The proposition to the fan is that an act’s online presence, the work, and the activities can be used as a source through which community can be formed and explored. The online aspect of this particular practice is important as it quickens community formation. Artists and fans once hindered by the limitations of local geographies could now find fans using a set of global networking tools that had sprung up in the 2000s.” (Anderson 2014: 169)

As Ne Obliviscaris' reputation grew within the global metal community, they set their sights on becoming a more established international touring act. In 2013, they embarked on a self-financed headlining-tour of Asia, where the response was so positive that the band immediately wanted to return in order to build upon their established momentum. At the same time, their record label was urging them to also consider touring in Europe and North America in order to capitalize on the praise their album was receiving in those territories. However, while the band did desire to tour extensively and felt it was in their best interest to do so, their geographically peripheral status as an Australian band made international touring prohibitively expensive. As Ne Obliviscaris' manager, violinist and vocalist Tim Charles explains:

So, there are six of us in the band and we tour with our own sound engineer, and so that's seven people...we sat down and thought well, how much are flights to do all these things, and we worked out that it was going to be at least 50-60 thousand dollars just for the basic flights, for seven people to and from Europe, to and from the US, and for a tour through Asia, and that wasn't even counting any of the other expenses like van hire, accommodations and petrol... (Holder 2014)

For Ne Obliviscaris, it was all too clear that the costs of touring the world for a moderately successful, progressive metal band from Australia were not going to be matched by the primary revenue streams often derived from touring (e.g. performance guarantees and merchandise sales), nor from financial support from their record label and/or government artist grants.

This was Ne Obliviscaris' watershed moment: they could either tour the world in an attempt to establish themselves internationally and go heavily into debt doing so, or they could accept the limitations of their regional status and only tour when—and if—it

made financial sense. If the band wanted to gain entry into the much larger markets of North America and Europe, they would need to develop an alternative financial solution.

This is “when that reality set in”:

...we thought ‘look, we have to tour to all these places, that’s the only way to advance our career and get a good foothold in these markets. We didn’t want to cut anyone out, we didn’t want to just pick and choose, which is what a lot of Australian bands have to do, because it’s so expensive. They pick a market to invest in where they think they have the most chance of doing well. I guess we didn’t want to cut those corners, so we thought, well maybe we should look at other ways to try and get this money, and that’s where the idea [of crowdfunding] came about. (Holder 2014)

In 2014, crowdfunding was already becoming an established, if still uncommon practice for recording artists primarily seeking to fund specific projects. In the extreme metal music scene, a number of recording artists had already successfully crowdfunded their album recordings, either on their own or in conjunction with a record label.<sup>19</sup> Among these successes was one campaign undertaken by another Australian progressive metal band called Arcane, who in 2013 quickly raised AUD\$11,937 from 136 supporters to fund the recording of their third album *Known/Learned*. As Charles recalls, the success of Arcane’s funding campaign had an impact upon Ne Obliviscaris’ decision: “we thought, well if they can do it, maybe it’s something we can keep in mind?” (Holder 2014).

With few other options available, Ne Obliviscaris then decided to crowdfund their world tour expenses. However, in doing so, they were entering uncharted territory. In the

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<sup>19</sup> Examples of this include the Canadian progressive metal act Protest the Hero, who notably raised USD\$341,146 from 8361 contributors via Indiegogo (Protest the Hero 2013), as well as successful album-funding campaigns from Darkest Hour (who also raised \$72,619 from 1200 contributors through Indiegogo) (Darkest Hour 2016) and Obituary (who raised \$60,669 from 925 contributors through Kickstarter) (Obituary 2013). Crowdfunding has also been used to finance a number of other aspects of a recording artist’s career, including van repairs (Abysmal Dawn 2016), the cost of replacing stolen equipment (Divita 2017) and even to cover medical bills (Vallecillo 2015).

short history of the practice it was still relatively unprecedented for a recording artist to initiate a crowdfunding campaign in order to specifically acquire (what was essentially) tour support directly from their audience.<sup>20</sup> As Charles reiterates, crowdfunding “hadn’t really been done before in this way; a lot of bands had been crowdfunding albums, but it was unusual for a band to crowdfund a world tour” (Charles 2016a). During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (and even still today), tours were often funded through a combination of an (often recoupable) loan, financial support from the record label and/or revenue earned from the tour itself through performance guarantees and merchandise sales (Krasilovsky and Shemel 2007: 25).<sup>21</sup> To crowdfund an international tour at this early stage of their career was therefore unconventional. They were seeking a way to augment existing revenue streams by raising capital directly from their audience—a move which effectively opened the door to relations and practices unaccustomed in metal recording artistry.

### **The Pozible “World Tour” Campaign**

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<sup>20</sup> In 1997, the British rock band Marillion managed to raise \$60,000 through their website in order to fan-finance a North American tour, representing the first-ever example of an artist using the internet for large-scale fan-fundraising (Masters 2013). Most famously, musician and performance artist Amanda Palmer used a crowdfunding campaign in 2012 to raise over 1 million USD to fund the making an album, an art book and a tour (Palmer 2012; Powers 2015). However, both Marillion and Palmer—much like other artists of note who recently used a crowdfunding campaign (e.g. De La Soul, TLC)—already had the luxury of a well-established audience; in other words, they were able to market their campaigns to an already built-in fanbase after having previously released albums through a major label. In Palmer’s words, crowdfunding such a large amount is perhaps “the kind of thing that a new artist can never do,” or will find difficult to achieve in the early stages (Sisario 2012).

<sup>21</sup> With the exception of superstar artists like, for example, Led Zeppelin or The Rolling Stones, touring was a loss-leader for record labels who viewed it primarily as promotional tool intended to boost album sales in record stores (Denisoff 1997: 62-63).

On June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Ne Obliviscaris launched the “Ne Obliviscaris WORLD TOUR” crowdfunding campaign through the Australian platform Pozible with a funding goal of AUD\$40,000.<sup>22</sup> They presented their case to their audience as follows:

One of the difficult things about being a band from Australia is that we are REALLY far away from most places in the world, and that means to do an extensive world tour would unfortunately cost us a LOT of money. We have worked out that return flights from Australia to Europe/UK, Asia and North America alone will cost us over \$50,000 AUD...And as much as we are desperate to come out and play for all our fans across the world we unfortunately just don't have this sort of money at this stage in our careers and so to make these tours happen we need YOUR help. (Ne Obliviscaris 2014)

As a means of encouraging their fans to participate, Ne Obliviscaris offered a number of incentives, or what they term as “rewards,” offered in return for a financial contribution (Ne Obliviscaris 2014). Offering incentives is a common feature of crowdfunding campaigns, often appearing as a selection of graduated options corresponding to the amount of money a fan contributes.<sup>23</sup> For music-related projects, these options can include items like rare recordings, campaign-only merchandise, or some kind of unique experience or service provided by the artist. Because such incentives are often of significantly lower value than the contribution amount, they often serve as a kind of token, tip or gift offered in exchange for the fan’s contribution. The difference in value between the fan’s contribution and the reward offered is then mutually understood to also

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<sup>22</sup> Launched in 2010, Pozible is the largest crowdfunding platform in Australia catering to artists, musicians and creators. Pozible is also an “all or nothing” crowdfunding platform, in that the company does not process any of the pledged funds if the funding goal is not met (Pozible 2018). This is in contrast to “flexible funding” platforms like Indiegogo, which permit pledged funds to be kept by the fundraiser even if the campaign goal is not reached.

<sup>23</sup> This is in contrast to other crowdfunding models such as 1) charity-based fundraising (where nothing is offered in return), 2) equity-based crowdfunding (where the contribution is interpreted as a form of start-up capital in return for a financial stake in the project’s outcome) and 3) debt-based crowdfunding (where the contribution acts more like a loan which is expected to be paid back).

represent a kind of financial “gift” towards the campaign goal.<sup>24</sup> For example, 190 people chose the reward option for an “exclusive Ne Obliviscaris t-shirt only ever available through this crowd funding campaign.” For this T-shirt, each contributor pledged the intentionally inflated amount of \$45.00. The shirt in this case represents a kind of “thank you” gift to the contributor for their pledge, while also serving to reinforce the fan’s personal investment in, and commitment to the campaign’s overall success (Pozible 2017).<sup>25</sup>

Ne Obliviscaris developed these incentives after examining those offered by other successful crowdfunding campaigns. They then introduced a variety of options they felt would appeal specifically to their fanbase. As Charles describes, “we thought if we [came up with incentives that were] really special, a collector’s sort of item, we thought that they would sell. We thought if that sells, and we get X amount of this, then at worst we should get pretty close to our target” (Holder 2014). In total, Ne Obliviscaris settled on 31 different incentives across a variety of contribution levels. At the low end of the spectrum, the minimum contribution was set at \$5, with the “reward” being a personalized thank you email from a member of the band (26 people chose this). Other incentives included a pair of signed drums sticks for \$20 (chosen by 13 people), a hand-written lyric sheet for a \$30 contribution (chosen by 30 people) and a 30 minute “Skype chat” with the band in exchange for a \$50 contribution (chosen by 4 people). In the mid-

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<sup>24</sup> In this way, “rewards”-based crowdfunding is not unlike the ‘pledge drive’ campaigns run annually by National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States, who similarly offer items like mugs or tote bags in return for a specific donation amount.

<sup>25</sup> In other words, the reward system serves the secondary purpose of building “meaningful relationships between creators and consumers before a product is completed, which may inspire donors to feel a sense of intimacy with the creator and an added ownership over the final results” (Powers 2015: 124).

level tier, contributors could choose to receive a “one hour personal training session with NeO bassist and resident gym junkie” Brenden Brown for a \$65 contribution (chosen by one person), while at the higher end of the spectrum, one could get a 45-minute music lesson with a member of the band for a \$100 contribution (chosen by one person). Three supporters also contributed \$600 each for a lifetime “everlasting guest list,” good for “every NeO show for as long as we both shall live from this day forward” (Ne Obliviscaris 2014). However, the most popular incentive was a signed, hand-numbered, campaign-only CD-EP, which was chosen by 297 contributors for \$95 (which alone brought in \$28,215).<sup>26</sup>

Remarkably—and despite the campaign’s limited eight-week term—Ne Obliviscaris reached their original funding goal of AUD\$40,000 in just 38 hours. In the end, they received a total of AUD\$86,132 from 1008 individual supporters, breaking an Australian crowdfunding record in the process (T. Williams 2014). In defiance of expectations, they proved that it was possible for a marginal artist performing extreme music to acquire financial capital directly from a modestly-sized, yet highly dedicated fanbase. In this case, the crowdfunding model afforded Ne Obliviscaris the ability to institute a new and unconventional financial relation between themselves and their audience. In the context of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century, a band at Ne Obliviscaris’ level of popularity would not have been able to undertake an extensive, professional world tour

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<sup>26</sup> What makes “rewards”-based crowdfunding effective—and profitable—is that it does not require the artist to invest a lot of their own resources into creating and developing them; the incentives consist mainly of experiences, services and/or token merchandise items and necessitate little up-front financial investment from the artist. In this case, Ne Obliviscaris are able to offer unique and low-cost incentives which might entail only a brief time-investment, or a cost-free, ‘value-added’ task (e.g. signing an autograph). From the fan’s perspective, these are also the types of incentives which contribute to a more meaningful, affective connection with the artist—and by extension a greater attachment to the artist’s livelihood and ongoing success.



without going significantly into debt.<sup>27</sup> There was simply not a framework in place that permitted emerging or marginal artists to tour internationally for long periods without the financial backing and promotion of a record label.<sup>28</sup>

Ne Obliviscaris' endeavor strongly resonated with a core group of 1008 of their most dedicated fans. In some ways, Ne Obliviscaris' case appears to confirm the "1000 true fans" thesis outlined by Wired Magazine executive editor Kevin Kelly in 2008 (Kelly 2008). At the time, Kelly described an emerging scenario whereby the ubiquity of online social networks, platforms and services might potentially serve as a basis for a new funding relationship between artists and their fans. The idea was that through this online relation, a less mediated artist-fan relation was emerging through which an artist might actually "make a living" by securing the support of a core group of 1000 "super fans." Kelly describes these "super fans" as the most enthusiastic and passionate of them all; they are willing to buy anything that their favorite artist creates and often exhibit a deep, emotional attachment to the artist. Moreover, these are the fans who serve as an

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<sup>27</sup> Debt was a defining feature of the 20th century music industries model. Recording artists were often saddled with debt from the moment they received a recording advance. In many cases, while the recording advance appeared to be direct financial support from the record label, the artist is actually only getting their own money 'up front' as a recoupable loan against their future royalties (Passman 2012: 83 -84). The artist was therefore held responsible for the costs of production, and they would not receive any royalty payments until they first recouped the entirety of their advance. Moreover, there are many other recoupable expenses which record labels use to redirect the costs of success back upon the artists themselves (e.g. photoshoots, artwork, bus rentals and so on). For example, any money spent by the label for promotion, videos, tour support, equipment, long-distance phone calls, etc., was almost invariably treated as a kind of loan to be repaid out of the artist's own future royalties, highlighting the harsh reality that lurked behind the seemingly secure status of being a "signed" recording artist (Stahl 2013: 112-115).

<sup>28</sup> This analysis does not discount the vast networks of DIY (do-it-yourself) venues, agents and promoters found in global 'underground' music scenes; however, these networks were often not designed nor intended to sustain artists seeking to become full-time professional recording and touring artists.

“evangelical force” that can spread the word and help cultivate new fans (Anderson 2014: 176).

Kelly’s thesis is founded on two criteria: artists must “create enough each year [to] earn, on average, \$100 profit from each true fan.” Secondly, artists “must have a direct relationship” with their fans, as well as the capacity to receive direct payments from them. If an artist then manages to get each of those 1000 “super fans” to spend enough per year on something they create, they can potentially receive pre-tax gross earnings of \$100,000 a year. Ne Obliviscaris’ Pozible campaign provides an example of how this scenario might work in practice; they had a core, international, dedicated fanbase who were willing to support them, while the Pozible platform provided them with the necessary technical tools to interact with those fans and receive payments from them. As Kelly explains further:

If you lived in any of the 2 million small towns on Earth you might be the only one in your town to crave death metal music...Before the web you’d never be able to satisfy that desire...But now satisfaction is only one click away. Whatever your interests as a creator are, your 1,000 true fans are one click from you. (Kelly 2008)

The success of Ne Obliviscaris’ Pozible campaign confirms that online crowdfunding can be beneficial for artists seeking to fund projects from geographically remote areas, particularly as “technology [enables] the distancing of patronage networks over space” (Swords 2017: 70).

The ‘1000 true fans’ thesis was echoed and praised by technology and music industry commentators as a practical means through which even the most niche artists might earn a living (Anderson 2014: 176-177). However, the celebratory rhetoric often

ignored or downplayed the deeper implications of Kelly's thesis. For example, the formula only works for recording artists if they are willing to transform themselves into something *more* than just music-makers. In other words, when they confront their audience in a direct exchange relation, they take on roles more akin to content and/or service providers; in order to sustain their income, they become marketers, producers, retailers and distributors, all in one. For the music and technology company mediators who profit from such content providers and facilitate their "direct" transactions, this represents an ideal, accommodating development. After all, the recording artist carries the expense, burden and risk involved in developing themselves and servicing their fans (Meier 2017:59-60).

Despite the campaign's success, Ne Obliviscaris found themselves in many ways right back where they started:

...while the crowdfunding campaign was a huge success and did exactly what we needed it to do, the limitation of a campaign in that setting is that it is designed to fund a particular project (in our case a world tour) and then once the project is done, the money is gone. (Ne Obliviscaris 2016)

Ne Obliviscaris toured the world, gained new fans and became a much more internationally established band, yet they were still not receiving the ongoing capital necessary for them to sustain their touring and performing activities beyond a limited, project-to-project basis. As Charles describes it, the band's financial circumstances after the world tour ended only presented them with new challenges:

I was spending my time trying to solve all these problems with the band and try to work out what to do financially to keep everyone in the band going, because we had issues where members were thinking 'maybe we should stop touring, maybe we should take six months off so everyone can save up some money'. . . After so many years, I didn't want to do that; I

didn't want to pass up any opportunity that we had that was good for our career. *I didn't want money to get in the way.* But the reality was we were not making any money on those tours. We were losing money. So, we had to find some new solution, some new way forward. (Charles 2016a)

It is one thing to use crowdfunding to cover travel expenses, and another thing altogether to bring home the income necessary on top of that to pay bills, rent and mortgages while away on tour for months at a time. Nevertheless, the Pozible campaign did hint at crowdfunding's wider potential—if only a system was in place that might harness that potential and sustain it over a longer term:

[We knew] our fans wanted us to succeed. We just needed to find a way to let them help us. So, I had this...such a strong feeling that our fans desperately want this, and the industry is failing us and our fans. That we are here, we want to team up, we want to combine, but for whatever reason, the system is not working, and as a result we are struggling to continue. We had an expiration date on our dream...our dream was 'on loan.'" (Charles 2016a)

This metaphor of having their dream “on loan” highlights Ne Obliviscaris' transitional state; they are recording artists inhabiting an uncertain positioning between an old, seemingly “failing” system (the record label-based model of development and support still central to rock and heavy metal norms and values) and an emerging industry “common sense” where the artist is expected to engage practices of self-development, self-marketing, self-branding and self-support in the course of maintaining a music-making occupation (Meier 2017: 85). Moreover, this ‘dream-on-loan’ metaphor recalls how signing a contract and working with a record label was—and remains—a primarily debt-driven relation. In 20<sup>th</sup> century rock recording artistry, the dream was always “on loan”; very few managed to achieve the stardom necessary to outrun it and fully pay off their recording advance and other recoupable costs.

The limitations and tenuous nature of the project-to-project crowdfunding model were evident: if their dream was going to become an ongoing reality, Ne Obliviscaris were going to need *ongoing* capital. Things then took a different turn when a fan suggested that they look into a new online crowdfunding platform gathering attention in the United States called Patreon. In contrast to the single-project funding model of platforms like Pozible and Kickstarter, Patreon was designed to mediate ongoing financial contributions between fans and artists; it was a neo-patronage-based model set up to foster exactly the type of sustainable funding relation that Ne Obliviscaris were seeking. Because of the success of their World Tour crowdfunding campaign, Ne Obliviscaris knew that their fans were willing to financially support them in new and unconventional ways. Patreon therefore appeared to be a potential solution which might help them make their dream of becoming full-time recording and touring artists a reality. However, in asking their audience to patronize them—and effectively *employ* them—they were about to test just how far they could push the boundaries of the crowdfunding relation in the context of an ideologically rigid heavy metal tradition.

### **The Patreon Initiative**

No band has ever done something quite like this before...so let's make history together. (Ne Obliviscaris 2016)

On March 3, 2016, Ne Obliviscaris launched their second crowdfunding initiative through the Patreon platform. Inspired by the pre-industrial practice of artist patronage, Patreon provides a means for fans to financially support creative workers in an ongoing

fashion through recurring, monthly contributions in an amount of their choosing.<sup>29</sup> Much like crowdfunding platforms based on single projects, Patreon is also designed to provide exclusive access to so-called ‘perks’ in return for financial support. These perks are often presented in the form of limited, patron-only merchandise, some kind of direct access to the band (a backstage pass etc.), or some other form of interactive and/or affective experience designed to make the fan feel like they are a part of the artist’s “inner circle” (Ne Obliviscaris 2016). In other words, the artist is required to be much more attentive to their fan-cum-patron’s needs in often unconventional and imaginative ways in order to sustain the relation.

At the top of their Patreon page, Ne Obliviscaris introduce their Patreon initiative by imploring their fans and prospective patrons to sign up and “join the Ne Obluminati” (Ne Obliviscaris 2016). Once they join as members, these patrons gain access to the aforementioned perks, experiences, things and/or services that become more elaborate at higher contribution levels. The various contribution tiers are then listed vertically on the right margin of the page, with each graduated level appearing below the other in descending order. Each level is given a name which links it to the broader concept of the “Ne Obluminati,” which they portray as a kind of secret society-themed club. For example, to simply join the club, a patron can first become a “Neophyte in the order of the Ne Olbuminati” by contributing \$5 a month, while enjoying perks ranging from

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<sup>29</sup> The patronage system of artist sponsorship was a prevailing feature of pre-industrial society, where during the Middle ages and into the Renaissance, civil authorities, the church, royal families and/or wealthy aristocrats would sponsor and commission artists, poets, musicians, architects and others to create secular and non-secular works which often served as representations of their status, power and prestige. This system was instituted most concretely (but not exclusively) in Europe, up until the emergence of exchange-based markets and public-funding models during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Williams 1981: 39-43; Swords 2017: 65-67).

advance access to new music, videos and merchandise as well as their own “Neophyte” lanyard. For \$10 a month, one can then become a “Templar in the Order of the Ne Obluminati,” where members have “access to exclusive video tutorials from NeO Members” as well as “exclusive band interviews where YOU ask the questions” (Ne Obliviscaris 2016). The next three levels correspond to greater amounts of financial commitment, from “Master,” to “Reverend,” to “Grand Master” levels, where patrons are invited into the “inner circle with access to the band beyond what anyone else in the world gets” (Ne Obliviscaris 2016). Members at this level will also receive personal Skype and/or phone call ‘updates’ from the band, have access to a dinner/meal with the band when they are on tour, as well as access to the backstage and permission to watch the band from the side of the stage during live performances.

These incentives represent Ne Obliviscaris’ willingness to cultivate and satisfy their fans’ interests and desires in imaginative and unorthodox ways in the course of developing this new revenue stream. Or more specifically, these are the types of incentives which are intended to accentuate inclusivity and reinforce the fan-artist bond in the context of the funding relation, as well as accommodate the emerging expectations of the *fan-as-patron*. Patrons may therefore expect to feel like they are a part of the artist’s “inner circle” and may anticipate some measure of access to their creative and occupational lives; that is to say, they may come to perceive themselves as something like *investors* in the artist’s careers, (at least partly) responsible for the artist’s development and success. As the fan takes on the role of patron-investor, the recording artist—as a “Patreon creator”—takes on a role not unlike that of a start-up company seeking venture capital. The political roles and orientations of the recording artist

therefore become more ambiguous as they take on these more capital-seeking positionings towards their patron-investors. This relation then appears to place the recording artist in a contradictory position: as a class of creative labor, they remain in a subordinate and precarious position vis-à-vis capital—yet as “entrepreneurs” working in the context of the neo-patronage relation, they are also aligning themselves explicitly with the priorities and interests of capital.<sup>30</sup> In the world of Patreon, this duality is not perceived as a contradiction; on the contrary, the ability to acutely market and brand oneself to one’s audience is characterized by Patreon as a necessary attribute of successful Patreon creators (Seitz 2018).<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, despite its fundamental character as an exchange relation (e.g. the patron contributes and then receives a “reward” in one form or another), the Patreon model “is not reward-centric,” as “patrons are not “paying for a reward (in most cases),” they are more so motivated to contribute because they ostensibly want their favorite recording artist to succeed while making the music they enjoy (Swords 2017: 69). The “investment” that patrons are making is then at least partially returned through the “dividend” of the satisfaction they may receive from directly supporting the artist and their music.<sup>32</sup> In the case of Ne Obliviscaris, the incentives offered are mostly low-cost,

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<sup>30</sup> As Stahl (2015) explains, this contradictory status is nothing new for music-makers, who have in different historical circumstances identified as either individual, capital-seeking artists or wage-earning workers: “[A]s artists, music makers are independent entrepreneurs, aligned – even identified – with capital, whose contracts reflect their individual bargaining power. As workers, music makers acknowledge their collective dependence on and subordination by capital.”(Stahl 2015: 138). The case of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon can be seen as representative of this ongoing tension as artists negotiate new relations and practices in the digital music economy.

<sup>31</sup> The Patreon model—along with the relations and practices it cultivates—will be examined more closely in the next chapter.

<sup>32</sup> In this case, the “dividend returned” notably does not come back with ‘added value’ to the investor; the dividend is limited to the *affective aspects* of the Patreon incentives. Therefore, while Patreon patrons are seemingly “investing” in the artist by providing capital to the artist, they are also



experiential and/or affective in nature—e.g. receiving a phone or Skype call, getting a guest list spot and/or backstage access at a live performance, or access to member-only videos and recordings. This relation is then mediated by Patreon towards mutually desirable ends: for the fan-cum-patron/investor, Patreon provides the portal through which they might realize this more direct type of access.<sup>33</sup> For the artist, Patreon provides the architecture and tools necessary for sustaining the type of ‘deep’ fan interaction necessary for maintaining an ongoing flow of supporting capital.

Since the idea behind Patreon is to institute a continuous financial relation, Ne Obliviscaris do not identify a final amount which would ultimately end their campaign. This indefinite status is reflected in the unusual funding goal which Ne Obliviscaris’ chose for their Patreon initiative: they hope to achieve the equivalent of the Australian minimum wage.<sup>34</sup> Or more specifically, they are seeking enough in monthly contributions through Patreon so that they might pay each member of the band a minimum wage (as established by the Australian government’s Fair Work Commission Panel).<sup>35</sup> This goal was initially outlined in the upper left margin on Ne Obliviscaris’ Patreon page:

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not getting back any percentage on their investment—a prospect which oddly appears to collectively make them something more like owners.

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that seeking “direct” access to the artist through the patronage relation does not necessarily imply the desire for a more intimate, “personal” one. Recent research by Swords found that patrons are mostly motivated to simply support the artist in the course of their work, not to ‘get close to them’: “The more direct relationship between artist and patron that Patreon sought to create, then, is specifically a more direct financial relationship, rather than a personal one” (Swords 2017:71).

<sup>34</sup> At the time that Ne Obliviscaris launched their campaign in March of 2016, the Australian minimum wage was AUS\$17.70. As of 2020 it stands at AUS\$19.84 per hour (Australian Government 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Notably, the first modern minimum wage laws were introduced in Australia and New Zealand in 1894 (Starr 1981:1). Currently, Australia also has one of the highest minimum wage rates in the world (Smyth 2015). Moreover, the idea of providing recording artists *specifically* a minimum wage has achieved traction in some territories and studies. For example, in 2015, the French culture minister introduced a voluntary agreement to the French parliament recommending that artists receive a “guaranteed minimum remuneration for digital exploitation of their records” (Flanagan 2015) Additionally, a widely shared infographic from the data visualization site Information is Beautiful took on the issue of digital streaming royalties by comparing how many “plays” or individual streams

Minimum wage in Australia is \$17.70AUD (\$13.03USD) an hour or \$672.60AUD per standard 38 hour work week. Our goal is to try and reach a monthly contribution on our Patreon of \$15,000 USD. Once we hit that target, after factoring in all costs in running our Patreon, creating and delivering rewards, and any fees involved etc., we will finally be able to say we are earning minimum wage and able to focus on NeO full time! We have no expectations of wealth or riches. That is of no interest to us. For us it is much simpler, the dream of being able to do NeO full time and be able to survive financially in the process. (Ne Obliviscaris 2016)

At the time, if Ne Obliviscaris were to pay each of their six members a minimum wage, calculated at AUD\$672.60 per week, it would convert to AUD\$16,142.40 per month or AUD\$32,284.80 per annum. The total annual income then needed in order to pay the entire band a minimum wage would then be AUD\$193,708.80. In order to accommodate the USD standard used by the Patreon platform, Ne Obliviscaris adjust this to a monthly funding goal of USD\$15,000 (CAN\$17,725) per month, or USD\$180,000 (CAN\$236,700) per annum. Tim Charles explains how he came to the conclusion that this amount was a sincere representation of (what he believed to be) the value of the band:

Before we did the launch, I wanted to have a goal in mind, what we were aiming for...so I looked at what the minimum wage is in Australia, and I worked out how much we would have to earn to get six people minimum wage. I set that as a target; it's something we haven't reached yet, it's aspirational. I thought, isn't it quite insane, Ne Obliviscaris...we are one of the bigger metal bands in Australia, in a genre that's got hundreds and hundreds of bands. For anyone else at the top of their industry, they would expect to be paid well. (Charles 2016a)

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a solo artist would need in order to earn the equivalent of of the U.S. monthly minimum wage (Dredge 2015).

On one hand, Ne Obliviscaris' decision to attach their campaign goal to the minimum wage sets a potential precedent for how much artists might expect to receive through the neo-patronage relation. On the other, it represents an indirect appeal for musicians and artists to also be remunerated based upon the same minimum wage standard that many other employment categories enjoy. Charles believes that this is not an outlandish proposition; especially when compared to what "anyone else at the top of their industry" is making, the minimum wage appears to be a reasonable goal. Moreover, by attaching their Patreon initiative to the minimum wage, Ne Obliviscaris are explicitly identifying themselves as—and with—working class people.<sup>36</sup> The minimum wage is an amount that the average, everyday fan can potentially relate to; it represents an acceptable, concrete and somewhat universal standard of remuneration which directly links their Patreon initiative's success to the ongoing livelihood of the band—while also being flexible enough to accommodate their patrons' varying income levels, funding capabilities and preferences.

While the idea of patronage itself is not new, the platform model through which it achieves its modern expression is. At its core, the Patreon platform is a non-neutral, capital-seeking platform company which generates revenue from mediating the financial transactions between patrons and artists. Much like other prominent online platforms dealing with the mediation of assets and services (e.g. Airbnb, Uber, Taskrabbit etc.), Patreon acts as a coordinator of transactions, interactions and exchanges among producers and consumers. However, it is also an apparatus of accumulation which

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<sup>36</sup> There is a long affiliation with working class, 'blue collar' ideology in heavy metal music, extending back to its populist, white male youth-culture roots during the late 1960s and 1970s (Weinstein 2000:100-102).

extracts economic rents from the networked social activity of its users. By using the platform and adhering to its terms and conditions, platforms elicit, oblige, instruct and direct their users to take on specific political roles and ideological positionings—a consequence which is most clearly reflected in the rise of entrepreneurial, ‘gig’ work in neoliberal political economies (Smith 2016) (this theme will be explored more in the next chapter).

In the case of Patreon, the artist is afforded the ability to directly access their patrons and provide them with exclusive access to experiences and content in return for their financial support—something that would not have been possible before the appearance of online networks and digital payment mechanisms. For Ne Obliviscaris, the Patreon model represents an artist-fan relation more in congruence with how contemporary music fans are using new media platforms to consume music and connect with artists; e.g. through streaming platforms like Spotify (Stutz 2018) and (the currently dominant) YouTube (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry: 2018:27), as well as through social media ‘story-telling’ platforms like Instagram and Snapchat (Hernandez 2016). Band leader Tim Charles confirms this notion of accommodating and working with changing audience consumption practices:

I felt we needed to stop trying to tell fans how to support us in ways that they had made clear they weren’t interested in doing anymore. You know...everyone’s pleading with their fans, “please buy the cd, buy the music.” That’s all good and well, but it doesn’t work and it hasn’t worked, and people need to move on; it’s that simple. The public have decided that this is how they are consuming music and they are doing it in a different way, and it’s changed the industry landscape. Instead, we have to listen to them and take advantage of the way that the modern music industry can work. (Ne Obliviscaris 2016)

In other words, rather than cling to older, outmoded models of generating revenue (as the RIAA infamously did during the 2000s<sup>37</sup>), Ne Obliviscaris chose instead to work with Patreon, a model which they perceived to be more responsive to the practical needs of their fans—as well as their own need for capital.

However, while the Patreon platform provides tools—or the *means* through which the neo-patronage relation might be instituted and rationalized, the artist is the one tasked with the problem of convincing their audience of its necessity and usefulness. Ne Obliviscaris attempted to tackle this issue first through a short, introductory video at the top of their page (beneath the invitation to ‘Join the Ne Obluminati’). Here, visitors are presented with a two-minute ‘pitch’ from band leader Tim Charles, where he describes (speaking to the camera) how recent structural and economic changes in the music industries have left recording artists like Ne Obliviscaris struggling financially:

The way the industry works, is that we do this, and we lose tens of thousands of dollars every tour, you know, we get treated like special people and then no one gets paid a dollar, and...it’s a crazy, crazy industry. Things need to change, not just for us, but for a lot of bands to be able to keep doing this. No one pays for CDs anymore, but at the same time, there are tens of thousands of fans across the world who love what we do...we feel like, if the fans had an opportunity to support the bands that they love, that the bands would be able to survive and they would be able to do something, get somewhere and make a living. (Ne Obliviscaris 2016a)

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<sup>37</sup> The RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) is a trade organization who represents the interests of record labels and distributors in the United States. During the early 2000s, the RIAA initiated a number of high profile infringement lawsuits in response to the widespread digitalization and subsequent online sharing of copyrighted musical works. These lawsuits targeted the users of the software which facilitated the sharing (Napster, Kazaa etc.)—users who in many cases were ignorant, wrongly targeted or simply unaware of the consequences, resulting in significant negative publicity (Knopper 2009:183-189). Ultimately, the RIAA was fighting against a tide of technologies and practices which were steadily becoming standard to the distribution and consumption of digital music—all in a failed attempt to preserve an existing revenue model based on the sale of compact discs, while incurring millions in legal expenses in the process (Masnick 2010).

Directly below the video, Ne Obliviscaris outline their argument through a lengthy statement entitled “Let’s Empower the People.” This section describes in greater detail the possibilities and limitations introduced by their recent Pozible World Tour crowdfunding campaign, as well as the uncertain future which confronted them in its wake. They end with a direct appeal to their audience to join their Patreon campaign in order to help them establish a new, ongoing funding relation which might permit them to do the band as a full-time occupation.

Ultimately, Ne Obliviscaris’ appeal to their audience worked; many fans were immediately convinced to “Join the Ne Obluminati” and become patrons—about 500 within the first month (Ne Obliviscaris. 2018). However, their Patreon initiative also sparked a significant “backlash” of criticism from (some) fans, scene members and other extreme metal recording artists who were accusing Ne Obliviscaris of “begging” from their audience (Holder 2018). The next section will examine the substance of the “backlash” first; more specifically, it will examine how the announcement of Ne Obliviscaris’ Patreon initiative clashed with conventional audience expectations and narratives of legitimacy and authenticity in rock recording artistry. The subsequent section will then analyze how Ne Obliviscaris sought to sideline and overcome this criticism by introducing their own claims and propositions regarding the value and utility of the Patreon model.

### **2.3. “Welfare Metal”: A Backlash Emerges**

How artists are perceived by an audience is a critical factor in their success. However, before they can reach an audience, there are the ever-present dues to be paid. (Denisoff 1997: 40)

### **Legitimacy, Dues-Paying and the Work Ethic**

The response to the announcement of Ne Obliviscaris' Patreon initiative was a mixture of enthusiasm, skepticism and criticism. On one hand, the band's most dedicated fans, other extreme metal recording artists and even their record label expressed solidarity and support for the band in their new endeavor (Giacca 2016; Hereld 2016; Mack 2016b; Bean 2016). On the other, they also received a great deal of condemnation through social media and online forums, the extent of which could be described as a "backlash" (Rhombus 2016; Lambgoat 2016). Above all, critics complained that Ne Obliviscaris' Patreon initiative amounted to a form of 'digital panhandling,' or 'begging' from their fans. For example:

Use your own fucking money!!!! This is the second time they've done this. If they can't afford to be on tour then save up the money yourselves and then go on tour. Stop begging for money like spoiled little brats asking their parents for a higher sum of pocket money. (Social Media Commenter #1 2016)

Fuck crowd funding bands. I have a job, doesn't pay well, but I have far too much pride to beg... Guess I'm one of those people who believes hard work pays off (Social Media Commenter #2 2016)

I know plenty of people in bands and they all work full time because they are realistic about what they can achieve and, wait for it, use the money they earn doing other shit to pay for overseas tours rather than going into debt and then sobbing about it with begging bowl in hand. (Quoted in Bean 2016)

According to these evaluations, Ne Obliviscaris were somehow not *earning* their success the hard, "authentic way" as popularized in rock n' roll mythology and 'how to make in the music industries' discourse—e.g. through working day jobs, "slogging it out" in the clubs, incessant touring, "organically" building an audience and eventually "getting

signed.” Much of this discourse was established in the context of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century music industries, where aspiring recording artists—as the autonomous authors of their creative work—were tasked with the responsibility of converting their talent into an occupation. As Serge Denisoff described at the time: “talent alone cannot guarantee recording success. It all hinges on the performer’s ability to persuade others to recognize their ability” (Denisoff 1997: 37). Such was—and remains—the “meritocratic appearance of recording stardom” (Stahl 2015:146).

As a demonstration of one’s capabilities and perhaps more importantly, one’s authenticity, it was then expected that aspiring artists pay their dues accordingly in advance of signing a recording contract. As a rite of passage of late-20<sup>th</sup> century rock recording artistry, the expectation of dues-paying dictates that success—as in, earning a living from creating and performing original music—is gained through self-sacrifice and honing one’s skills in the formative stages of one’s career, prior to entering the more professional confines of the music industries. Dues-paying is also understood to be critical to acquiring and maintaining the respect of popular music audiences, who may perceive the artist as ‘one of their own’ or as a representative of populist values more generally (Toynbee 2000: x). The recording artist must therefore seem to have done the necessary work before being “rewarded” with success. Denisoff describes the conditions of dues-paying as follows:

The price of survival is a major obstacle to success. The ability to overcome unappreciative audiences, and the cost of the electronic equipment, and daily sustenance is essential. Many groups have neither the commitment nor the ability to cope with these conditions...Putting up with daunting conditions is precisely what an aspiring act must do. Dues paying is exactly that. (Denisoff 1997: 52).



By demonstrating and adhering to dues-paying practices, aspiring recording artists earned the respect of their peers, audiences and potential employers. At the level of the proto-market, dues-paying was also tied to the composition and performance of original music; it was proof of an aspiring artist's valuation of creativity over the prospect of immediate commercial gain (e.g. performing in a cover band) (Groce 1989: 406).

Dues-paying stories and narratives also reinforce the perception that there is a rational-meritocratic framework in place through which deserving artists might be acknowledged and eventually rewarded.<sup>38</sup> In this world, recording artistry is an endeavor not suited for the weak-spirited; one needs to exhibit a great deal of “stamina, desire, or perseverance to travel the road the stardom” (Denisoff 1997: 40). To their critics, Ne Obliviscaris appeared to be avoiding their self-developmental responsibilities; they were not taking an established, “legitimate” path to professionalization and remuneration. This was ironic, considering that they had already spent the previous thirteen years touring and recording quite self-sufficiently, all while getting very little in financial return. Instead, these critics were choosing to wash over and/or ignore the facts of how patronage-based crowdfunding works in actual practice; they were clinging to these ideologically-infused perceptions of dues-paying—either out of spite, or in ignorance of the changing economic conditions of recording artistry.

The “backlash” to Ne Obliviscaris’ Patreon endeavor echoed these dues-paying expectations. However, beneath the panhandling rhetoric and obtuse commentary, the

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<sup>38</sup> Dues paying narratives are ubiquitous in popular music texts. They often appear in the early chapters of artist biographies (e.g. Greg Allman (Allman and Light 2012) or Loretta Lynn (Lynn and Vecsey 2010)) as well as “Behind the Music”-type programs and biopic Hollywood films that focus on authenticating an artist's early development (e.g. *The Runaways* (The Runaways 2010) or *Eminem* (8 Mile 2002)). They also appear on contest shows like *American Idol*, where the ‘back stories’ of aspiring artists accentuate their everyday struggles and ordinariness (Stahl 2013: 52-54).

criticism was more fundamentally about the *work ethic* principle (Weeks 2011).

According to Kathi Weeks, the “work ethic” is a “remarkably tenacious set of ideas, dispositions, and commitments” which sanction and encourage the performance of non-instrumental, productive labor (Week 2011: 42). As a secular iteration of the Weberian Protestant work ethic, it is the “animating ethos of capitalist development”; it serves as a “moral justification” for the pursuit of work as a self-actualizing “end in itself” (Weeks 2011: 44). Ne Obliviscaris’ critics are invoking this ethic when they react to the idea of the neo-patronage relation as illegitimate and antithetical to dues-paying norms and expectations. In their view, recording artists (like Ne Obliviscaris) should not be “asking for handouts” directly from their fans; they should be scraping away and earning their keep—and if they are lucky, their success—the old-fashioned way, or not at all.

In this case, the work ethic’s ideological power is what underlies the dues-paying rhetoric and lends it historical weight. As a characteristic of late 20<sup>th</sup> century recording artistry, these dues-paying narratives were shaped in the context of the “industrial work ethic” specific to Fordist production regimes (Weeks 2011:46). Unlike the Protestant ethic, the industrial work ethic was guided by more earthly motivations; it was an ethos “converted to the new values and rhythms of industrial discipline,” where the emphasis was more on social mobility and individual achievement in one’s own lifetime (Weeks 2011:45). The expectation was that if one adhered to the rules of one’s employment institution, worked hard and delayed gratification, a better life might be “earned” in the long run. As a term which connoted a trial period of employment, dues-paying meant that one should expect to undergo a period of (relative) hardship in exchange for the opportunity to gain experience in one’s field. In the context of organized labor, it was a

demonstration of commitment to the union’s ideals as one advanced from apprentice to journeymen status. This use of the term then came to express similar practices for recording artists over the course of the mid-to-late 20th century; dues-paying came to signify the unwritten moral code by which recording artists were authentically evaluated and deemed worthy of success—or not. It provided a rational justification for the delayed gratification of ‘getting signed’, as well as the necessity of putting in hours of often unpaid labor with the hope of attaining “journeyman” status—or more specifically, the professionalization conferred by the signing of a recording contract.

This industrial work ethic is still evident in the “panhandling” rhetoric of Ne Obliviscaris’ critics; in this case, they are clinging to it as a means of confronting and challenging the seemingly contradictory and inauthentic practice of crowdfunding. To them, the Patreon model is inherently illegitimate; asking one’s audience for capital is fundamentally *not* a dues-paying expression. However, when examining Ne Obliviscaris’ actual practices in this regard, they are not necessarily eschewing the work ethic principle, so much as embracing what Weeks would identify as its “postindustrial” form:

After the middle of the twentieth century, another element, present but not as stressed in the industrial discourse, came to the forefront of the new postindustrial work ethic—an element that characterized work as a path to individual self-expression, self development, and creativity (Weeks 2011: 46)

In other words, the Patreon model, rather than providing a means for artists to circumvent or bypass these enduring dues-paying expectations, rather reconfigures them into more distinctly *post-industrial* creative labor practices and works forms—e.g. practices which are more reliant on “self expression, self development and creativity.” In this case, the

industrial dues-paying expectations espoused by Ne Obliviscaris' critics are clashing with the arrival of a new production model (Patreon) and the unusual practices it requires of artists; they have not yet accepted this new production model and its practices as genuine—that is, the band's critics have yet to buy into, or interpret the neo-patronage relation as a valued, *legitimizing* expression of the work ethic principle in recording artistry.

In particular, there was one social media comment thread which highlights how these industrial work ethic views came to infuse the narrative of the backlash. This comment thread began when a fellow metal recording artist (hereafter referred to as “the Artist”) posted a negative statement directed towards Ne Obliviscaris, which was then widely-shared throughout the network, sparking an extended argument involving dozens of people and hundreds of comments (many of which similarly expressed vitriolic opinions towards the band and their Patreon endeavor). Shortly after Ne Obliviscaris announced their initiative, the Artist released a statement directed towards the band which questioned the ethical basis of their funding initiative:

What a joke. How about you just learn how to tour better? ...Sleep in the fucking VAN like men, not a tour bus. Sure your neck will hurt a little, just drink more, welcome to rock n' roll. Take a smaller crew with you on tour if you can't afford it, don't pan handle to fans because you are touring beyond your means. If you aren't making enough money for a full crew then guess what? You don't deserve one...Lets keep in mind these guys already crowd funded \$86,000 to do a world tour in the first place. Asking for more sure does seem greedy to me. (The Artist 2016)

In this statement, Ne Obliviscaris is being judged according to an unwritten moral code of metal recording artistry: they were irresponsibly “touring beyond their means” and resorting to panhandling, rather than “sleeping in the fucking van.” On one hand, the

Artist's views reflect the durability and persistence of the industrial work ethic principle and the dues-paying expectations it cultivates; on the other, they also reflect ideological positions strikingly similar to those in neoliberal discourse—especially their emphasis on individual responsibility and self-sacrifice in the course of adapting to market imperatives. This is peculiar, because Ne Obliviscaris were already engaging in quite self-reliant, independent dues-paying practices; the difference is that they were being expressed through the work ethic's postindustrial form—e.g. through “creative” and entrepreneurial practices which center on one's “affective, cognitive and communicative capacities” (Weeks 2011: 70). Once more, the problem is that Ne Obliviscaris' critics have yet to perceive or acclimate to the ways through which these dues-paying practices have changed—not only in recording artistry, but also in response to contemporary neoliberal work formations and imperatives. The result is an ideological disjuncture; one whereby late 20<sup>th</sup> century narratives and expectations of dues-paying in recording artistry are clashing with emerging postindustrial, entrepreneurial practices (like crowdfunding). This ideological disjuncture was reflected throughout the responses to the Artist's initial statement—many of which confirmed the expressed view that Ne Obliviscaris were failing to undertake more self-reliant financial practices:

It's so lame to expect your fans to financially support you because you can't figure out the business. Possibly even childish. I mean, isn't it their own responsibility to put a roof over their heads? (Social Media Commenter #4 2016)

Welfare Metal. (Social Media Commenter #5 2016)

You don't deserve people's money. If you wanna tour outside of your own country, then foot your own godamn [sic] bill. (Social Media Commenter #6 2016)

Ne Obliviscaris, are a fucking hand out band. World tour funded by fans and now asking for montly [sic] hand outs so they can live better.. Jesus christ cunts, your [sic] in a band. Work hard and if it doesn't work out get a fucking job... (Social Media Commenter #7 2016)

Like in the Artist's initial statement, these comments emphasize traditional norms of economic responsibility and self-reliance in the course of paying one's dues. Similarly, they also express ideological affiliations with "neoliberal common sense" (Hall and O'Shea 2013). According to Hall and O'Shea, neoliberal discourse produces its own "inevitable and natural" common-sense narratives; ones which infuse all aspects of society with the logic of market competition and a morality of competitive individualism (Hall and O'Shea 2013: 12). This "logic" finds its most concrete expression through the enduring work ethic principle; it is the "common sense" according to which working subjects are evaluated in capitalist accumulation models. The ensuing power dynamics which mediate the employment relation then appear self-evident; the general expectation is that each individual is ultimately responsible for taking care of themselves under the explicit terms and conditions of the market:

. . .the work ethic—and this remains consistent over the course of its historical transformations—is an individualizing discourse. The individual's economic achievement or lack of achievement depends on and is reflective of his or her character. What could be seen as the responsibility of a collective becomes the duty of every individual. (Weeks 2011: 52)

In this case, Ne Obliviscaris is being evaluated, judged and symbolically punished according to this logic: are they engaging in self-reliant, *fair* practices in the course of 'putting a roof over their head,' or are they somehow cheating the system by seeking "welfare" from their fans?

The criticism directed towards Ne Obliviscaris and their Patreon initiative reflects the durability of the industrial work ethic principle and the dues-paying narratives it cultivates. Especially when enmeshed with the values of neoliberal individualism, the expectation of dues-paying implies a compliant positioning vis-a-vis capital; more specifically, the types of identities and expectations which artists adopt in the course of preparing themselves for recruitment in the music industries, accustoms them to the necessity of doing (what can often be) unpaid work, as well as the belief that they must physically and mentally ‘suffer for their art’ in proving themselves ready for occupational advancement. In turn, these dues-paying narratives permit audiences to measure and evaluate the extent to which recording artists (like Ne Obliviscaris) are “making it on their own merit.” To their critics, wrongly or not, Ne Obliviscaris’ Patreon initiative appeared to contradict established work ethic and dues-paying norms of rock and metal recording artistry; they were “begging for money like spoiled little brats” and therefore seeking the ‘easy way out’ (Social Media Commenter #1 2016).

### **Gendered Perceptions of Metal Recording Artistry**

The backlash was also heavily tinged with criticism suggesting that Ne Obliviscaris' patronage initiative was a decidedly *unmasculine* endeavor. Specifically, there was a persisting, gendered subtext throughout the discussion that the making and doing of rock and metal music was—and remains—‘men’s work’, which should be undertaken as a kind of masculine struggle and/or competition with other artists:

I slept in the van all the time. One time I froze my ass off trying to sleep on the beach cus [sic] there was no room in the van. No bitching. (Social Media Commenter #8 2016)

Weak and pathetic. (Social Media Commenter #9 2016)

...they whine and cry and ask their fans to pay their lost wages instead of any one of a thousand less insufferable options. (Bastardhead 2016)

And as initially expressed by the Artist:

Sleep in the fucking VAN like men... (The Artist 2016)

Statements like these reveal how the work ethic principle intersects with and reinforces gendered perceptions of rock and metal recording artistry. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the music industry workplace was a location where conventional and expected employment roles were often assigned according to gender. As Weeks describes, these types of gendered role assignments are reflective of the organization of work in capitalism more broadly:

To say that work is organized by gender is to observe that it is a site where, at a minimum, we can find gender enforced, performed, and re-created. Workplaces are often structured in relation to gendered norms and expectations. Waged work and unwaged work alike continue to be structured by the productivity of gender-differentiated labor... (Weeks 2011: 9).

In the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century music industries, the roles available for women in rock music making were often limited in an employment field characterized by institutionalized discrimination and sexist power relations. In short, women entering the field have long been forced to accommodate and adjust to a persistent “masculinist tradition” in rock music making (Leonard 2007:23). As Chapple and Garofalo (1978) described:



The history of women in rock music has been a difficult one. Dues have been high, successes rare...Like any other form, however, rock is not inherently sexist. What makes it sexist is that women have been denied all the essential power roles necessary to its creation. (Chapple and Garofalo 1978: 271)

In other words, throughout much of rock music's mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century 'golden era,' women were less likely to attain impactful and meaningful positions, either as musicians or performers, or in other industry capacities (e.g. as producers, recording engineers, A & R representatives or managers).

For example, when examining the work of performance and touring during this era, even women who were the focus of the band, or fronted their own band (e.g. Grace Slick, Janis Joplin, Suzi Quatro etc.) were nevertheless compelled to 'fit' into male-dominated and masculine-defined workspaces. In some cases, this meant they had to "straddle the role" of being a sexualized performer while on stage, while becoming 'one of the guys' when off stage (as their band members, managers and roadies were most often all men) (Chapple and Garofalo, 1978: 288). Moreover, a woman performing an instrument (e.g. a guitar, or the drums) might not be not taken as seriously—particularly in the metal music scene at the local and proto-market level (where crucially, many such roles and possibilities are initially shaped) (Kahn-Harris 2007:76).

In other cases, such "nontraditional female musical roles" were even met with lower pay and creative input within band-oriented units (Groce and Cooper 1990). Even the labor involved in the mundane tasks of carrying, setting up, and making repairs and/or adjustments to musical equipment was perceived as "non-feminine" activity (Bayton 1990: 210), while the act of trying out and buying equipment in musical instrument shops was also heavily conditioned by a "masculine atmosphere" (which rendered such spaces

unwelcoming and/or foreboding for women) (Leonard 2007:49). Similarly, the technological domain of the recording studio was a space where “male mastery” was often unjustly and overtly privileged (Leonard 2007: 51) These are the types of gendered perceptions and/or role assignments which informed how, and by *whom* the work of rock recording artistry was to be done—assumptions which still persists today, as evidenced in the rhetoric of Ne Obliviscaris’ critics.

These perceptions were reinforced in the music industries at its highest levels; for example, when Grammy-award winning producer-manager Roy Silver explained that artists wanting to ‘make it’ must display an “ability to sustain performing regardless of emotional crises,” he is conveying a particularly macho assessment of the music industry workplace (Denisoff 1997: 37). Such masculine assessments were then confirmed through dues-paying expectations that ‘making it’ in rock recording artistry required not only emotional fortitude, but an engagement with (imagined or not)—some kind of *manual labor*. As the name itself implies, paying dues is steeped in working class tradition; it is associated with blue-collar notions of hard work, union apprenticeship and economic advancement within a defined institutional context. In his 1977 study of working class youth in England, Paul Willis found that the engagement of difficult, manual work was interpreted as an expression of one’s “masculine capacities...[a] heroic exercise of manly confrontation with *the task*. Difficult, uncomfortable and/or dangerous conditions are seen, not for themselves, but for their appropriateness to a masculine readiness and hardness” (Willis 1981: 150). Work which was not manual or physically difficult was therefore the opposite; it was “mental work,” which was perceived as inherently effeminate, uncreative and “conformist”:

...the association of different kinds of work with different sexual genders confirms the nature of division in the world of work...mental work becomes for 'the lads' mere 'penpushing', 'not really doing things' and, most importantly, 'cissy': it is not basically man's work or within the manly scope of action. (Willis 1981: 149)

Performing manual work was a confirmation of these youths' attachment to a broader, masculine-based working class identity—one which served to reproduce and legitimize gendered employment roles during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and still even today) (Willis 1981:149). The inference here is that manual labor is inherently more authentic, as opposed to the inauthentic labor of “mental work” (e.g. “white collar...office work”), which among the workers in Willis' study was considered *feminine* activity (Willis 1981:148):

Manual labor is associated with the social superiority of masculinity, and mental labour with the social inferiority of femininity. In particular, manual labor is imbued with a masculine tone and nature which renders it positively expressive of more than its intrinsic focus on work...Gender and mental/manual difference provide the atavistic divisions to be worked up in contemporary cultural forms and relationships... (Willis 1981:148)

In the case of Ne Obliviscaris, this masculinized perception of manual work permeates the rhetoric of their critics; specifically, it appears in the accusation that the neo-patronage model permits the band to somehow avoid the hard work necessary to be not only successful, but *legitimate* recording artists. In other words, Ne Obliviscaris are (seemingly) engaging in the passive, 'mental work' of crowdfunding. In doing so, they are prioritizing the feminine work of building and maintaining relations with patrons, over and above the 'masculine work' of dues-paying, as crudely understood by comments like “grinding it out like the rest of us,” “sleeping in the van” and above all, “not bitching.” To the band's critics, there is a feminizing quality to crowdfunding; it evokes a

type of affective, marketing and retail-based work which appears inauthentic and illegitimate when confronted by rock and metal recording artistry's more masculine, dues-paying narratives.<sup>39</sup> By choosing to use the Patreon model, Ne Obliviscaris are challenging the masculine hegemony of conventional rock music-making practices and the industrial work ethic which underlines it; instead, they are embracing the seemingly inauthentic, artificial and feminine practice of crowdfunding.<sup>40</sup>

These types of meritocratic-based appeals to dues-paying and work ethic-based notions of authenticity are extensive in the criticism. Even when Ne Obliviscaris framed their Patreon endeavor around the seemingly reasonable minimum wage goal, it was still not enough to sway their detractors; the value of the minimum wage goal was negated by its direct association with the neo-patronage crowdfunding model. To them, the entire idea of crowdfunding one's career was by definition *illegitimate*; it was antithetical and contradictory to established norms of professional advancement in rock and metal recording artistry. These critics were therefore desperately clinging to these late 20th century ideological interpretations of dues-paying and the masculinized, work ethic-based notions of authenticity which underpin them—despite the fact that the Patreon model in many ways requires much more work and overall commitment from recording artists than was ever expected of them under the previous regime.

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<sup>39</sup> The perception of marketing as “secretarial work” in the music industries was reflected in the fact that throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were often hired at record labels to perform the work of publicity, promotion and media relations, while men were assigned the more ‘masculine’ work of artist development and/or label management (Negus 1992:115-128).

<sup>40</sup> From another perspective, Norma Coates traces the interrelationship between masculinity and authenticity to “the discursive and stylistic segregation of ‘rock’ and ‘pop.’” More specifically, “rock is metonymic with ‘authenticity’ while ‘pop’ is metonymic with ‘artifice’.” As such, what is “‘authentic’ becomes ‘masculine’ while ‘artificial’ becomes ‘feminine’”. Rock, therefore, is ‘masculine’, pop is ‘feminine’, and the two are set in a binary relation to each other, with the masculine, of course, on top” (Coates 1997: 52).

## Alternative Perspectives and Reconsiderations

While the “begging” narrative was the dominant theme of the backlash, it was not the only one. There were some commenters who felt differently; they did not blame the band for trying to do something new, and instead argued that it was really up to the fans themselves to decide if they wanted to become patrons, or not. Although in the minority, these alternative perspectives were representative of a less ideologically rigid understanding that there does exist an urgent need for recording artists to find and/or develop new revenue streams, and that Ne Obliviscaris were trying to make that happen. For example:

I know it's not the case, but I feel that even [the Artist's band] could be that successful if they tried. But some bullshit moral ethic is probably keeping them from trying it. I mean fuck, if the fans are willing to help why is that a problem? It's not like they are saying "we won't make music anymore if you don't" they are just saying that if they do help that they could focus solely on music and make it their living as it is their passion. That's not wrong that's a solid point. (Social Media Commenter #10 2016)

One commenter even came back at the Artist and other negative commenters more directly, calling them out for being closed-minded, unnecessarily negative and generally failing to understand exactly how the neo-patronage relation works in actual practice:

Just because some musicians think outside the box and choose to try new ways to interact with fans and try to create a self-sustaining business model doesn't make them shitty people. It makes them smarter than these morons whining about paying their dues and judging them. A professional band is a business, and just because a bunch of people who aren't good at running a business give them shit and/or worthless opinions whilst they are thinking outside the box just makes said people look sad and jealous. (Social Media Commenter #11 2016)

This response in turn generated 52 replies on its own, the majority of which were from critics who remained unswayed by the commenter's arguments. Even as the commenter attempted to explain that the Patreon relation was not a charity, but more like a "glorified fan club," no one appeared to want to engage such views analytically or inquire about further information. If anything, this reveals how powerfully Ne Obliviscaris' detractors were clinging to the panhandling narrative, because they chose to either ignore, or remain unaware of the fact that the Patreon platform was not a charity, nor did it function as one. Ultimately, no matter how Ne Obliviscaris' supporters framed their argument, the critics would not bend: on one hand, they were stuck within the dominant narratives and expectations of a specific, late-20<sup>th</sup> century incarnation of rock and metal recording artistry; on the other, they were interpreting those narratives and expectations through contemporary neoliberal assumptions of work legitimacy.

Notably, the members of Ne Obliviscaris were also aware of these comments, and even joined the discussion periodically to point out errors and address the criticism. The Artist then responded to the band by reiterating his initial comments, albeit in slightly more diplomatic language:

I can guarantee you that I'm not jealous in the slightest bit...Congratulations on filling the quota on taking \$3000 out of "special" fans pockets per year and congratulations on all your success and having all the fans...This is really nothing personal and I know nothing I say is going to stop people from giving you money, that's not my goal, I simply gave some criticism and was making the point that it's not impossible as you guys made it sound to do this shit and be ahead. (The Artist 2016)

This was not the end of the discussion; several months later, the Artist posted another critical statement, this time calling out Ne Obliviscaris for supposedly "giving 10-minute

speeches during their set to convince people to donate to their go fund me campaign to keep them on their comfortable tour bus” (The Artist 2016). Again, this led to a firestorm of critical comments very similar to those in the first discussion, and once more Ne Obliviscaris chose to confront the Artist directly in the comment thread. This time however, the Artist replied to them with a more specific answer outlining why the neo-patronage relation is a bad idea:

I think I've made my opinion pretty clear on the topic. If all bands set up a Patreon it would be a constant battle of who can sound the most desperate for money in order to operate. I don't think that will be good for the scene. Money is a limited resource and fans want to support many bands and if that [becomes] the new standard there wouldn't be much to go around. They can do what they want and [so] can any other band. I just think it's kinda lame. (The Artist 2016)

In this statement, the Artist is critiquing an *anti-social* aspect of the Patreon model—a line of reasoning which is starkly different from the initial, much more conservative position (e.g. “don't pan handle to fans”). In this comment, the argument is that Patreon economically centralizes and commodifies what is a largely decentralized collective of small-scale, independent markets and proto-markets. It converts the vibrancy of a multifarious collectivity of music scenes into a highly individualized, ‘all against all’ model. In the Artist’s view, this upends the notion of the music scene or proto-market as a social space which artists conventionally enter into as equals, and replaces it with one where they are positioned primarily as rivals in competition—not just in getting the attention of audiences—but (eventually) in the securing of patrons, and therefore capital. Consequently, recording artists would become individual agents of capitalization bound by a clear market logic: adapt or perish.

From Ne Obliviscaris' perspective, their Patreon initiative presents not so much a contradiction, as a rational, revenue-generating option. In their words, they are simply "forging a new path forward for themselves and others." However, the Artist's statement reveals a different perspective, one where the Patreon model represents a more radically individualistic, anti-social relation; one where each artist must set up and manage their own accumulation model, in an all-out struggle with others for the "limited resource" of capital (while also directing a portion of their income towards the platform company which mediates the relation). This is in contrast to the previous regime, wherein artists would vie for the attention and support of an individual capitalist firm (e.g. a record label), which in turn provided the sustaining resources from which they might build a career. From an ideological standpoint, this does not appear to be a relation which is designed to "support the scene" or likewise the cooperative practices often attributed to 'indie' and/or DIY music-scene ethics. On the contrary, the celebratory rhetoric of entrepreneurship which is a hallmark of the Patreon model appears to introduce more economizing and decidedly neoliberal politics and values into recording artistry, something which—at least on the surface—Ne Obliviscaris appear to be embracing.<sup>41</sup>

In this case, the practice of recording artistry and the values of neoliberalism seem to share peculiar political-economic consonances; specifically, recording artistry's conventional individualism and creative autonomy—particularly when integrated into the

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<sup>41</sup> The ideology of indie—and the 'DIY' (do-it-yourself) practices it cultivated—are often defined by their collectivist ethos and oppositional politics; they "came to denote a set of values and practices that many invested with considerable moral, ethical and political weight" (Waksman 2009:215). In this context, DIY practices emerged as a means of production in marginal and underground music scenes in opposition to the broader commercialization and incorporation of rock. Defining oneself (as an audience or an artist) as "indie" was to associate oneself with the contested field of music scenes and genres existing on the oppositional margins of the "mainstream" music industries—a distinction which can often wash over the complex interrelations that often exist between the two (Kruse 2003:14).



ostensibly meritocratic framework of the music industries—appear to align with neoliberal values of self-reliance and self-responsibility in response to market imperatives. Moreover, the relatively autonomous, yet highly precarious work forms undertaken by recording artists—and culture industries workers more generally—in many ways “preconfigured” the deinstitutionalized, flexible and risk-bearing work forms engendered under neoliberalism (Stahl 2013: 12-14). These political-economic consonances then appear in stark relief in the neo-patronage relation, where autonomy becomes an unqualified and defining attribute—yet recording artists ironically carry more of the burden, risk and responsibility as hyper-individuated platform workers.

For example, Ne Obliviscaris are taking on more work and responsibility through the Patreon model than was ever expected of recording artists under the late 20th century record label regime. Nevertheless, their critics attacked them for somehow avoiding or ignoring expected, established dues-paying practices. The source of this disjuncture is the Patreon model itself; as a facilitator of post-industrial work forms, it takes industrial-era notions of dues-paying and reconfigures them into acts of entrepreneurial self-realization in conjunction with neoliberal and market imperatives. By requiring artists to ask their fans directly for capital, it appears to corrupt and/or cheapen (what was) an established means of evaluating the preparedness and authenticity of aspiring artists in rock and metal proto-markets. The critics who still cling to these old expectations of recording artistry are refusing to recognize this reconfiguration. From their masculine/industrial work ethic perspective, they are rejecting the Patreon fundraising model as a form of feminizing service work; or more specifically, they are rejecting what they perceive to be a new, even more subordinate relationship with capital. The schism between these

industrial and post-industrial views of work legitimacy reflects how working people—many who share the same conditions and experiences—can take on competing and contradictory ideological views as they confront new work forms and adopt new subject positions under neoliberalism.

Ultimately, Charles and Ne Obliviscaris could have simply ignored their critics; their Patreon initiative was already working well and doing what was intended: securing capital from a core group of dedicated fans. Despite not having reached their goal (of the Australian minimum wage for each band member), by February 2017 they were still receiving USD\$10,043 [CAN\$12,896] per month from 1078 patrons, who were contributing a per month average of \$9.32 each (Ne Obliviscaris 2018). As Charles recounted in an interview in 2018:

. . .with Patreon, because its something where there aren't a lot of bands involved yet, to really stick your neck out is to risk getting that backlash. For us, we had a little bit of backlash initially when it was announced from some people, but to be honest we really didn't give a shit because there was so much money coming in, and the success of the project from a business perspective was so strong. So, who cares if there are a few naysayers? A lot of bands have naysayers for all sorts of different reasons, but the reality is, this [Patreon initiative] changes our lives and changes our careers and that is what is important. (Holder 2018)

What makes this statement most surprising is that Ne Obliviscaris actually did appear to “give a shit,” because immediately after the launch of their Patreon initiative in March 2016, the band—and primarily Charles—went on what can best be described as an information offensive. Not only did they directly respond to their critics on social media (when they did not have to), they also evangelized and argued their case for the Patreon platform more widely through a number of interviews, statements and presentations. In many ways, the arguments the band presented *in response* to the backlash were more

compelling; they relied on more clearly pronounced ethical, democratic and rational claims than those outlined in their original Patreon initiative pitch. The next section will examine these arguments in detail in order to reveal how Ne Obliviscaris put them forward—not only as a means of countering the backlash—but with the more general purpose of legitimizing the neo-patronage relation as a normative practice to prospective patrons. These arguments will then be distilled and categorized into four distinct propositions, each of which outlines more clearly the emerging political tensions and contradictions of Ne Obliviscaris’ encounter with the Patreon platform.

## **2.4 Arguments and Propositions in Response to the Backlash**

For anyone else at the top of their industry, they would expect to be paid well. And here we are saying, if we can make the same as people at McDonalds, we would be blown away. And still, we had people going “how dare you”—after 20 years of training as a violinist, how dare you want to [make the same] as people flipping burgers? People didn’t see it that way, but that’s the reality. (Charles 2016a)

In the subsequent months after the launch of their Patreon initiative, Tim Charles introduced several arguments and claims intended to bolster the legitimacy of the Patreon model to skeptics, critics and prospective patrons alike. This approach was demonstrated most clearly in late 2016, when he took to the stage at an Australian music industry conference in order to give a lengthy presentation on the band’s experiences with the Patreon platform. At one point in his talk, he acknowledged the criticism the band received, and blamed it on (what he calls) a “disconnect” between music fans’ perceptions of how money is channeled back to artists—and “the reality” of how it happens in actual practice:

Shortly after we announced our membership initiative, I saw a few comments, from people and fans saying, “I am happy to give this band money to finance their next record...but there is no way in hell I am giving this guy money so he can pay his electricity bill.” And in my head, I am thinking, do you realize that every single professional musician that has ever paid an electricity bill, has paid it with money from their fans? You spend \$20 on a cd, and give it to the [record store], who gives it to the distributor who gives it to the record label, who gives maybe a dollar to the band, who then splits it up five ways and each member gets 20 cents. And then that musician with his 20 cents goes and pays his electricity bill...The reality is, that every Armani shirt that Metallica buys is paid from some fan that bought a T-shirt or a concert ticket. So, there is a little bit of a disconnect about this reality... (Charles 2016a).

Ne Obliviscaris believed that if they were going to counter the criticism and establish the neo-patronage relation as a more widely accepted, common endeavor among recording artists, they would need to make a stronger effort to change the panhandling narrative themselves. In this statement, Charles is attempting to by asking his audience to think more critically and holistically about how recording artists are remunerated through conventional music industries value-chains; he is asking them to envision the artist-fan financial relation as something which occurs *one way or another*, and where it is always the fan—as either a consumer or a patron—who puts money into the pockets of artists, despite how many mediators are involved.

However, while Charles is trying to overcome this “disconnect” by grounding and rationalizing the neo-patronage relation in familiar terms and concepts, the larger issue is still the underlying question of *legitimation*; or more specifically, it is the need to confer upon the Patreon model the same legitimizing power that for example, record labels conferred upon recording artists seeking professional status. For aspiring artists, ‘getting signed’ to a recording contract was a major confirmation of their transition from amateur

to professional—and one that still resonates today as a validation “of an aspiring artist’s reputation or brand” (Meier 2017:79). In the eyes of their critics, Ne Obliviscaris’ embrace of the Patreon model was so unconventional that it appeared to call into question their integrity and authenticity as professional recording artists—despite the fact that they were already signed to a major-independent label (although one who was apparently not able to provide them with the required funding necessary to match their aspirations). The arrival of the Patreon model dragged to the surface these enduring questions of professional legitimation in recording artistry: in this case, if a recording artist’s funding source is primarily established through the neo-patronage relation (through hundreds, if not thousands of micropayments from individuals), then how might such a model challenge or clash with conventional perceptions of an employer (e.g. the record label) acting as the primary, legitimizing investor in the artist?

What follows then is an analysis of the arguments introduced by Charles and Ne Obliviscaris in order to bridge this “disconnect” between themselves and their critics; more specifically, it is an examination of the rhetorical efforts the band employed in order to legitimize and validate the neo-patronage relation. In order to better collect, isolate and clarify these arguments, they are categorized into four key propositions, each of which is attached to a broader ideological, ethical and/or historical claim.

The first proposition argues that the neo-patronage relation is a ‘good thing’ because it represents a more *transparent* funding model for both fans and artists; the second proposition then claims that the patronage relation gives the audience a more *democratic* voice in deciding how (and which) artists receive funding; the third proposition asserts that the neo-patronage relation represents a more *ethical* model for

financing artist's careers, while the fourth claims that supporting a Patreon initiative is really just the same as paying membership fees to a *fan club* (with the primary example being *fan-funded sports clubs*). Each of these propositions provides a frame through which to examine and understand how Charles and Ne Obliviscaris chose to refine and articulate their arguments for the legitimacy of the Patreon model. However, and perhaps more importantly, they also reveal a great deal about the types of political orientations and subject positionings that recording artists are developing and taking on in the course of adapting themselves to digital-era entrepreneurial pressures.

### **A More Transparent Model**

The first proposition asserts that the Patreon model is a good thing because it is more *transparent*. As a principle of liberal democratic thought, transparency connotes good governance, accessibility and openness in accordance with the civic interest; however, transparency is also an ideologically flexible term which takes on different meanings in different political contexts. For example, it carries different connotations in neoliberal thought, where it suggests a calculated, instrumental form of 'openness' at both the institutional level and at the level of the subject. According to this interpretation, transparency is:

...a certain way of organizing society that emphasizes the individual as the basic constitutive active agent in the construction of his or her fate and of society at-large. In such a vision of social life, the transactions between citizens and the state and within the economy must be open and observable in the interests of maintaining a level playing field for all concerned. (Garsten and De Montoya 2008: 4)

This notion of “maintaining a level playing field” is central to the legitimation of neoliberal values and practices. By accentuating transparency’s usefulness as a *measure of accountability* (rather than a democratic ideal or goal), it implies a “technical rather than political settlement” (Birchall 2014: 77). It is also an emanation or example of “audit culture”, or “the process by which the principles and techniques of accountancy and financial management are applied to the governance of people and organisations – and, more importantly, the social and cultural consequences of that translation” (Shore and Wright, 2015a: 24). The Patreon model interprets transparency according to similarly instrumental terms; in this case, Patreon “creators” are encouraged (but not required) to be as transparent and accountable to their patrons as possible and not unlike how a corporation would to its shareholders. Notably, the Patreon platform explicitly refers to patrons as “customers” to whom the artist has the ‘responsibility of fulfilling all promised work’ (Patreon 2020). The implication is that in order to use the platform successfully and maintain the funding relation, creators need to visibly demonstrate to their “customers” that they are doing everything they can to attend to their needs. In other words, they are ensuring that their customers—like investors—are returned the “dividend” of a satisfying experience. As a mode of self-presentation, transparency underscores this customer service imperative in the neo-patronage relation.

Transparency also serves didactic and tactical purposes. Artists like Ne Obliviscaris are seeking to inform their audience of the “realities” of their financial situation. At the same time, the more informed their fans become of those realities, the more likely they are to be convinced to become patrons (and the more likely those “realities” might change). This more instrumental mode of transparency was

demonstrated by Patreon’s own co-founder and CEO Jack Conte, who eighteen months after the launch of the platform penned a widely shared essay online divulging the financial details of a recent tour undertaken by his band Pomplamoose (Conte 2014). In the essay, Conte explained how the band failed to make money, despite achieving gross earnings of USD\$135,983. He went into great detail about where the money came from, as well as who was paid and how much, and what losses were sustained. The essay was controversial in that many felt it only revealed how Conte and his band were ‘grossly mismanaging their finances’ (Rettig 2014) as well as “their own expectations” (Santos 2014). However, while the essay likely served the more calculated purpose of promoting his (much more profitable) Patreon endeavor, it also established a precedent for the transparent tone of what might be expected of the platform’s users—an approach which was clearly adopted later by Ne Obliviscaris.

In contrast to the prevailing record label relation (which helped to elevate recording artists to near-mythical status during the late-20<sup>th</sup> century), the Patreon model appears to bring artists ‘back down to earth’ by placing the emphasis on the occupational realities of contemporary recording artistry. It makes the artist’s livelihood a motivating factor for potential patrons to empathize with the recording artist as a human being with economic struggles much like their own.<sup>42</sup> Ne Obliviscaris first demonstrated this more “transparent” approach during their Pozible World Tour funding campaign, when they

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<sup>42</sup> Alternatively, if a recording artist chooses to remain non-engaging, unresponsive and/or keep their Patreon finances hidden (it is an option for Patreon creators to turn off their Patreon earnings statistics), patrons might be less interested in funding them or understanding why they might need financial assistance. For example, as one Patreon patron explained on the platform Reddit: “why would [artists] hide their income from their work? I don't get it, but I don't like it. It takes away from my feeling like I'm contributing to the art getting out to the world” (dncblues 2017).



spoke openly and candidly about their financial struggles and the specific costs involved in touring. When they launched their Patreon campaign in 2016, they were even more open about how their occupational aspirations were impacting their personal lives. They went into great detail about the “significant financial hardship” they were each facing as a result of losing their full-time jobs, and the “insane financial juggling” (that one member had to do) in order “to pay his mortgage” (so his wife and kids would be okay while the band was touring) (Ne Obliviscaris 2016). According to Charles, “a lot of it was this leap of faith; I just had this gut feeling that if we put ourselves out to our fans and say, this is the reality of the music industry...this is *our reality* and this is the reality of most bands in the music industry” (Holder 2018). In other words, they wanted to inform their audience of the types of financial hardships that they (and other recording artists) were encountering, the underlying details of which the average music fan may not be aware.

This is also where their appeal to transparency becomes more explicitly didactic: because they had attained a large following on social media, toured the world and released albums on a major-independent label, they still needed to clarify to their fans that they were not making a sustainable income:

...we are trying to say, ‘hey we actually made money of this’, or ‘no we didn’t make money off that’; to try and let them know where we are at so we can be honest and make sure that they know if we need their help at all, so that they can be involved. (Charles 2016a)

The Patreon platform underscores this mode of transparency; not only through the explicit suggestion that “creators” employ good “customer service” practices, but also through the implicit logic of openness adopted by the platform’s users. Charles and Ne Obliviscaris apparently have no demonstrated issue with this; to be open and

“transparent” about their financial and personal lives is a rational, opportunistic decision, and one in accordance with the expectations of the Patreon model.

As previously emphasized, this approach also contradicts conventional perceptions of rock and metal recording artistry; it positions extraordinary recording artists as average working subjects, who in many ways confront the same employment difficulties as their fans. Ne Obliviscaris are appealing to this notion of being everyday, working people, because it reinforces the narrative of ordinariness they want to project in support of their Patreon initiative’s minimum wage goal. As Charles describes it:

. . . transparency is really the opposite of what a lot of bands used to do. It used to be “I am rock star up here, and you should look up to me and I am going to be a bit mythical.” What we are trying to do is the exact opposite, and say “hi, I am Tim Charles, I am just an ordinary guy and last year I spent most of the year paying for my bills on my credit card, because I was a broke musician trying to follow my dream of touring the world.  
(Charles 2016a)

A “transparent” artist-fan relation then appears fundamental to making the neo-patronage relation work. It promotes a more sympathetic understanding and awareness of the underlying relations of production involved in recording artistry.

For Ne Obliviscaris, “being transparent” means calling attention to their status as “broke musicians” in need of financial assistance. However, in the context of the Patreon platform, “being transparent” also evokes a willingness to open oneself up to external, market-driven performance evaluations and expectations—a position which is again more in alignment with the calculative logic of audit culture (Shore and Wright 2015: 2015a). This modality of transparency provides a “rationality of governance and a corresponding set of dispositions and practices” which “encourage people to think of themselves as calculating, responsible, self-managing subjects” (Shore and Wright 2015: 421). These

“dispositions and practices” are then amplified within neoliberal work formations which rely upon reputation indicators (Hearn 2010), like for example those in the ‘gig’ economy where workers (e.g. Uber drivers) are heavily dependent upon the positive feedback of customers in order to continue using the platform in good standing (Chan and Humphreys 2018; Raval and Dourish 2016).

In the logic of audit culture, transparency is conceived as a political technique of self-governance. It becomes an instrument through which individuals might be encouraged, or at worst coerced towards subject positionings more amenable to accumulation. The Patreon model reproduces this “logic” through its own terms, conditions and regulatory mechanisms. It is introduced through suggestive, latent pressures which guide Patreon “creators” towards more open and transparent subject positionings vis-à-vis their patrons in order to maintain their reputation and succeed on the platform. The implication is that the “creator” should be fully open to evaluation in accordance with the demands and interests of their patrons—a customer-service guided approach that Ne Obliviscaris also appear to be embracing in their arguments.

### **A More Democratic Model**

The second proposition is that the Patreon model is good because it is more *democratic*. Specifically, Ne Obliviscaris are arguing that the neo-patronage relation “empowers” fans by giving them more freedom to choose which artists receive funding, how much, and under what terms and conditions. In turn, recording artists are held more accountable and responsive to their fans-cum-patrons needs and interests. Ne Obliviscaris first made this claim in their initial Patreon pitch:

...it is much more democratic this way. Instead of it being like the old days where the only bands that could become successful were the ones that had the support of a big label, these days it is YOU, the people out there that decide which bands succeed or fail. (Ne Obliviscaris 2016)

By becoming patrons, getting involved and ultimately voting with their wallets, Charles is arguing that fans are given more decision-making power over which artists receive financial support, and which do not. In this instance, he is likening the neo-patronage relation to the democratic process by accentuating its positive political connotations (e.g. the right of “the people” to freely and fairly choose). However, he is doing so by conflating it with the market democracy of consumer choice, or more specifically, he is appealing to the notion of consumer sovereignty.

The “sovereign consumer” is a central figure of liberal economic theory propagated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Austrian school economists (in addition to the then-expanding marketing and advertising industries) (Schwartzkopf 2011:10). In their perspective, the consumer was considered “the sovereign driver of the economy the same way as the citizen–voter was the sovereign in a political democracy”; as free actors engaging in rational choices, consumers perform actions much like citizens do; in the ‘democracy of the market’ they are afforded the freedom to buy, or not to buy a product—much like voters make choices in elections (Schwartzkopf 2011: 11). In this view, free markets are actually more democratic, because they (purportedly) function more efficiently, more responsively and non-coercively for consumers than do political apparatuses for citizens (especially when unimpeded by non-market forces like taxes,

unions and regulations). In other words, “by allowing free choice, markets were actually perfect democracies and consumers were the sovereigns” (Schwartzkopf 2011: 11).<sup>43</sup>

Notions of consumer sovereignty are evident in Ne Obliviscaris’ characterization of the neo-patronage relation as a model where patrons—as “the people”—are afforded more choice in deciding “which bands succeed or fail.” In Charles’ words—and echoing his similar claims regarding transparency—this is how the neo-patronage relation:

...holds bands accountable. If they put out a shit record or if they don't follow through on their commitments to their fans and why they are supporting them financially then the fans won't support them anymore. If bands put out music worthy of being supported and tour to give their fans a chance to see them play then they'll get the support they deserve. (Ne Obliviscaris 2017)

In their eyes, the democratic integrity of the platform appears intrinsic: each patron can make an informed decision regarding who is most deserving; and in turn, each artist (or in Patreon-speak, each “creator”) can make their own case for funding to their audience (much like politicians would to constituents in courting their votes). These appeals to democratic choice then provide ideological heft to audit culture’s logic of “transparency” and self-accountability; it then appears only rational that the patron be anointed king on the Patreon platform, just as the sovereign consumer is king in the capitalist marketplace.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> This distinction also served political ends: by championing the purported democratic power of the consumer, the political problems arising in the “phenomena of production” (e.g. labor unrest and class-based economic disparities, etc.) might be then be allayed (or at least distracted from) by emphasizing the ideal of consumer equality (Schwartzkopf 2011: 11).

<sup>44</sup> In this case, patrons are engaging in a kind of neo-feudal relation which inverts the original conception of patronage: rather than a single, wealthy, patron, the artist is now beholden to the whims and pocketbooks of a vast number of individual, “sovereign consumers” (each of whom contributes a micropayment to the artist’s monthly earnings).

Moreover, these democratic claims also appear to herald the removal of the record label as middleman or cultural gatekeeper. They argue that the audience is now afforded more power to choose which artists make it or do not, because the Patreon platform allows fans to circumvent the financial and curatorial power of such conventional mediators. As an expression of the discourse linked to Silicon Valley digital utopianism, these claims argue that new digital technologies and online platforms (like Patreon) act like liberating forces (Marwick 2018, Carr 2016; Morozov 2014). They purportedly free artists from the structural gatekeepers, constraints and inequalities of the old regime by providing them with the necessary digital tools and means of distribution to ‘make it’ on their own merit and determination. According to Hesmondhalgh and Meier (2014), such ““Web utopianism” conflate[s] the availability of this suite of new tools—in many ways a positive development—with the “flattening” of the music marketplace overall. Such perspectives argue that popular music’s gatekeepers and “middlemen” have been displaced in the Internet age and that the major record companies are increasingly irrelevant and, hence, en route to financial ruin” (Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2014: 103). Armed with the ability to directly connect with their fans online, the independent recording artist can then *directly* reap the rewards of their labor (a perception reinforced by the ongoing popularity of the “1000 True Fans” thesis outlined earlier in this chapter).

Ne Obliviscaris proclaim that the Patreon model is representative of this more democratic, direct and uncorrupted artist-fan relation; the ‘fan is now in charge’—only this time positioned as the driving force of a new, disintermediated patronage relation:

The old establishment is dying. Let’s...put the power back where it should be, with the fans who love and believe in the music that we, and so many great bands out there are creating...What we are doing, cuts out all the

middlemen and provides a direct way for fans to support NeO in an ongoing fashion. (Ne Obliviscaris 2016)

Disintermediation and democratization narratives arose alongside advances in digital music production and distribution in the mid-to-late 2000s (Hracs 2012; Leyshon 2009; Goodwin 2006). These narratives reinforced the perception that emerging internet and software-enabled technologies were “democratiz[ing] the music industry by lowering entry barriers and redistributing power...afford[ing] individual musicians unprecedented structural and spatial freedom” (Hracs 2012: 456).

On one hand, these new technologies did have a positive effect on the artist-audience relationship; music in general was easier to access and artists were able to connect more directly with their audiences. On the other, this “democratization” of the means of production and distribution did not necessarily translate to more liberating conditions for recording artists. According to a 2014 study by Geoghegan and Meehan:

... while the costs of recording, manufacturing, and distributing have approached zero thanks to digital technology, the extent of corporate control and corporate ethos is quite pervasive, even at the DIY and independent end of the spectrum. (Geoghegan and Meehan 2014:63)

...and as one survey respondent (in their study) exclaimed:

Looking at it from the indie point of view, the ethos of self-determination and DIY, that's not democratization but rather corporatization. It can be navigated in many different ways, but the pressure to take on some kind of business model from above has been increased rather than decreased by digital technology. (Geoghegan and Meehan 2014:64)

While the idea of “cutting out all the middleman” does have a populist appeal which may resonate with patrons, the reality is a bit more complex. The Patreon platform is a heavily capitalized corporation which still very much controls the terms and conditions of

platform use and therefore the *means of access* through which users and patrons can interact and exchange. Moreover, recording artists are themselves increasingly becoming more like “artist-intermediaries,” as they take on the roles, tasks and responsibilities once handled by the record label’s artist development department (Kribs 2016). Consequently, the gatekeeping tasks and duties of conventional “middlemen” are not so much disappearing, as they are being repositioned onto online platforms and services and/or “remediated” onto and *into* recording artists themselves (Kribs 2016: 2). For the entrepreneurial musician operating in ostensibly indie scenes and proto-markets, there are now more middlemen than ever—from digital distribution platforms (e.g. Bandcamp, Distrokid, Soundcloud), to merchandising platforms (Big Cartel, Indiemerch, King’s Road) to streaming platforms (Spotify, Tidal and Apple), to concert promotion (Songkick, BandsInTown)—they are just more numerous, fragmented and less institutionally centered than they were under the record label regime.

However, in Ne Obliviscaris’ idealized neo-patronage world, the artist and fan exist with no apparent middlemen in sight; the Patreon model is a seemingly neutral medium for the individual, democratic choices of patrons. Democracy discourse provides the “legitimizing rhetoric [which serves] to obscure deeper forms of commodification,” minimizing Ne Obliviscaris’ own emerging identity as capital-seeking entrepreneurs as well as Patreon’s role as powerful corporate gatekeeper (Meier 2017:154).

### **A More Ethical Model**

The third proposition is that the Patreon model cultivates a more *ethical* relation between the fan and the artist; it represents a more just and fair mechanism through



which fans can support and remunerate recording artists—particularly in a digital music ecosystem which has fragmented and/or limited most conventional revenue streams. This appeal for a more ethical remuneration model is a more latent theme in the Ne Obliviscaris’ pitch to their audience. It surfaces in the language they use which emphasizes both the economic and cultural value of music, as well as their belief that recording artists deserve better compensation—a claim which is most clearly expressed in their assertion that recording artists should receive (at the very least) a minimum wage. With aspirations of wider recognition and/or stardom, 20<sup>th</sup> century artists would often sign recording contracts which contained harsh, but standard stipulations regarding the recoupment of expenses (e.g. recording and promotional costs) in addition to low royalty rates (Passman 2003: 68-84, 92-96). Especially for unproven artists just starting out (e.g. those lacking “clout”), the rates and terms of recoupment were often highly unfavorable (Krasilovsky and Shemel 2000: 19-23). Moreover, contracts would contain restrictions which bound the artist to the label exclusively for what could amount to a career-length period—even if the artist becomes unhappy, wished to leave or change the arrangement in some way (Passman 2003: 103-106; Stahl 2013: 114-117).<sup>45</sup>

Ne Obliviscaris argument that the Patreon model represents a more ethical alternative recalls the anti-corporate politics of the independent (or ‘indie’) and/or DIY (do-it-yourself) movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Duncombe 1997). The movement was characterized by its emphasis on artistic autonomy, self-reliance and

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<sup>45</sup> Many artists found themselves locked into deals they regretted later on. Some were based on excessive duration and/or low royalty rates, such as the TLC-Arista/Laface Records dispute and bankruptcy (Philips 1996; Samuels and Henriques 1996). However, others simply involved young musicians unknowingly signing away their rights, such as the Beatles did when they transferred a majority share to the publishing company Northern Songs (Southall and Perry 2007), or when James Taylor signed away half of his publishing rights at the age of eighteen (Zollo 2015).

independent production and distribution practices (in opposition to those of the corporate culture industries). Whether it was publishing one's own fanzine, setting up one's own show, or releasing one's own music on one's own "indie" record label, the "independent turn" marked the arrival of a collectively-shared, 'DIY' ethos (Waksman 2009: 212). To be independent, or indie was therefore to embrace "a set of values and practices that many invested with considerable moral, ethical and political weight" (Waksman 2009: 215).

The proliferation of independent labels and distribution networks—often out of proto-market settings—heralded this ethic of a music scene 'for itself.' One primary example was the UK indie label Rough Trade, who promoted artist-centric agreements based on "personal trust" rather than long-term contracts, as well as then unheard of '50/50' royalty splits (Hesmondhalgh 1997: 261). For recording artists in these indie proto-markets and scenes, these types of agreements seemed a clear ethical alternative: they "significantly counteracted the processes of concentration and oligopolization which had been characteristic of the recording industry, and of the cultural industries in general, for much of the century" (Hesmondhalgh 1999:37). While the indie movement failed to coalesce into its own durable, functioning, alternative political economy, its foundational ethics and ideals harmonized notions of legitimacy and dues-paying and still persist in marginal, underground and niche music proto-markets worldwide (much like the one that *Ne Obliviscaris* emerged from). Charles' appeal for a more ethical remuneration model is in many ways rooted in the politics and aspirations of this indie ethic; however, in this case, the most glaring difference is that the corporate mediator—the Patreon platform—still occupies a core, dominant position in the relations of production.

From another perspective, Ne Obliviscaris' ethical appeal echoes Mark Banks' recent argument that greater justice needs to be afforded to cultural work and cultural objects more generally (Banks 2017). Banks claims that because contemporary cultural work is so often assessed primarily according to its instrumental and/or commercial qualities, its status as meaningful, expressive human activity 'in and of itself' is often marginalized and/or devalued. Therefore, cultural work should be understood:

. . .as a source of (not just) an economic value, but also a social value, as well as an aesthetic one, underwritten by different kinds of political sensibilities. Doing justice to cultural work therefore means respecting the 'internal' goods and qualities of work as a practice—but without discounting the external structures and pressures that tend to make such work somewhat less than appealing, and often deeply unfair and unjust. (Banks 2017:2)

In other words, cultural objects produced in creative work deserve recognition for their capacity to affectively and emotionally resonate with people, as well as provide fulfillment and meaning for their creators; these are the "internal goods" of creative work, which stand in contrast to "external goods" (e.g. more instrumental, profit-seeking goals and ends). In this case, doing justice to cultural objects (e.g. music) is to acknowledge their "transformative power [to] generate reflexive experiences and effects in excess of their conventional casting and value" (Banks 2017:35). In the absence of a viable indie sector (in its idealized 1980s sense), Ne Obliviscaris are asking their audience to "do justice" to their creative work; the neo-patronage relation is then posited as a more ethical model for providing the band a living as they pursue music-making and the creation of valuable artistic goods and experiences.

### **Patreon as “Fan Club Membership Initiative”**

Ne Obliviscaris also make the proposition that their Patreon initiative is a contemporary incarnation, or update of the conventional *fan club*. In several instances, Tim Charles even refers to their Patreon campaign specifically as an “ongoing fanclub membership initiative,” rather than a patronage or crowdfunding campaign (Holder 2018; Charles 2016a). In doing so, he is attaching the Patreon model to a more readily identifiable institution in order to make it more amenable to skeptical fans. It establishes Patreon as something more than a funding platform by accentuating its secondary function as a kind of online community of like-minded, enthusiastic fans. Taken together, they are claiming that the Patreon platform functions as both a fundraising model and an artist-centered, social network; it is responsible for cultivating communal as well as financial relations.

According to Théberge, fan clubs (as an institution of ‘fandom’ more broadly) arose during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in conjunction with the ‘star system’ in the television and music industries, primarily mediated through things like membership cards, newsletters and annual conventions (Théberge 2005: 490-91). However, the growth of online communities during the late 1990s and early 2000s provided fans with a new, ‘virtual’ space through which to convene with others in celebrating and supporting for example, their favorite actors, artists, athletes and/or authors. These online communities permitted geographically-dispersed audiences to “connect with other fans as well as artists both asynchronously and in “real time”” —a practice which further exploded with the growth of online message boards, instant messaging and social media platforms (Anderson 2014: 169-70). The use of the term ‘fan club’ by Ne Obliviscaris is likely intentional; it allows

them to develop the neo-patronage relation upon the discursive edifice of a well-recognized institution. Dedicated fans are therefore invited to join Patreon as members of an exclusive club—yet at the same time, they are being invited to join Patreon as patrons with a financial stake in their favorite artists’ livelihood.

However, it is notable that Ne Obliviscaris’ ‘Patreon-as-fan club’ analogy did not come from the world of music, but from the world of sports. Tim Charles is a long-time supporter of the Western Bulldogs, an Australian rules football team which also has a fan club membership system in place in order to raise funds, engage fans and build community relations. As Charles explains:

...the way financing works in the Australian Football League is that members buy a membership, and get to go out to games, and they send you out maybe a scarf or a hat...in return you get to do things, but you also get the knowledge that you are supporting this team to make sure that they survive... That comparison is really where this idea came from...this is kind of ‘fan club on steroids’ in the digital age. (Charles 2016a)

Charles is envisioning here that their fans would similarly join up and support ‘team NeO’ in their time of need—much like sports fans do for their favorite team: “That is how Australian sports teams work... they aren't owned by rich people like in the USA, they are financed directly by the public and they survive or fold based on how many members they have” (Ne Obliviscaris 2016b). The membership-based funding model utilized by these sports teams is an established Australian cultural-economic practice that taps into fan enthusiasm and converts it into an ongoing, mutually rewarding funding relation.

Charles’ declared team (the Western Bulldogs) are an organization in the Australian Football League (or AFL), the largest professional league in the country in

terms of spectatorship and revenue (Hill 2017; Sports Industry AU 2017). As part of the team's financial structure, the Bulldogs offer supporters a variety of annual member subscription packages (Western Bulldogs 2018). These packages are important for generating revenue; however, they are also key to the organizational makeup of the club, because the Bulldogs (like the majority of AFL teams) operate as a member-owned, non-profit company (Lenten 2012: 24). More specifically, the Bulldogs are defined (in their constitution) as a "public company limited by guarantee," which means that any profit derived from the club's activities must be reinvested into the club (rather than distributed to members).<sup>46</sup>

Much like the various 'patron tiers' offered by Patreon, Bulldog supporters are encouraged to apply by choosing a specific membership level, each of which comes with its own "benefits." For example, a supporter can apply for a basic membership (called a "Sideline membership") by contributing AUD\$60 per annum. In return, the fan is officially "counted in the Club membership number" and receives a "Membership Pack" which includes items like a cap, scarf, magnet and a bumper sticker (Western Bulldogs 2018). At the top level are more expensive membership packages, like for example the "Premiership Gold" option, which features reserved seating for two people at home games, priority and social club access, and an invitation to the end-of-season party (although one does not need to be a member to purchase individual tickets to games) (Western Bulldogs 2018). As a marketing concept, fan clubs are essential to building a sense of "brand equity" in the sports team; they instill in the member a sense of self-

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<sup>46</sup> This is outlined in the team constitution as follows: "The Club's income and assets must be used solely to promote the Club's objects," and therefore "The Club must not in any circumstance pay or distribute any profits, income, dividend or assets to the Members." (Footscray Football Club Limited 2018)

identification and investment in the activities of the club and the team's success (Biscaia et al 2014: 159). In this case, the Bulldogs' membership packages serve similar ends that the Patreon platform does for Ne Obliviscaris: they help both entities develop a more stable source of ongoing revenue, while also permitting diehard supporters a means to connect and identify more deeply with the funded entity.<sup>47</sup>

Charles presented the band's Patreon initiative in these familiar terms (as a "fanclub membership initiative"); he framed it as something akin to paying monthly membership dues to an association or subscription service, while also emphasizing its more experiential aspects (e.g. the exclusive perks, access and benefits of membership). This is most clearly demonstrated by the headline at the top of their Patreon page, which brazenly invites fans to "*Join the Ne Obluminati*"—conveying the perception that they are joining a fan club, versus a funding relation.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined and contextualized one metal band's advance into uncharted economic territory and their struggle to maintain legitimacy amidst rigid, masculine work-ethic norms in recording artistry. It described Ne Obliviscaris' encounter with the Patreon platform, and their subsequent efforts to rationalize and normalize their crowdfunding endeavor against established perceptions and expectations of dues-paying and artist development in metal music proto-markets. As Ne Obliviscaris sought to

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<sup>47</sup> It is notable that the "branding" of recording artists is undertaken with similar objectives: to draw upon the artist's personality, image and self-expressive capacities in the course of marketing their identity as well as their music. (Meier 2017:82)

legitimize the Patreon model as a means of raising capital, they encountered a backlash from other scene members, artists and commenters, who interpreted their endeavor as antithetical to conventional understandings of how recording artists are supposed to ‘make it in the music business.’

Ne Obliviscaris answered this criticism with a series of claims and arguments intended to boost the legitimacy of the Patreon model. The band presented their case by appealing to principles of democracy, transparency and ethics, as well as comparing the neo-patronage relation to existing fan club models operating in the world of professional sports. They did so—not only to counter the backlash—but with the more general purpose of establishing the neo-patronage relation as a normative practice to critics, fans and prospective patrons alike. From a broader perspective, the claims put forward by Ne Obliviscaris also reveal how neoliberal imperatives are pressuring recording artists into new and often contradictory subject positionings vis-à-vis both their audiences and new online platform-mediators. These pressures find expression through the practices and relations that the Patreon platform requires its users to adopt in the course of developing the neo-patronage relation with their audience.

In spite of the protestations of their critics, Ne Obliviscaris’ funding endeavor appears to have worked. They managed to achieve an impressive amount of patron support, proving that the naysayers did little to alter the opinions of the super fans who were the band’s most fervent supporters. Not only did they succeed in generating an impressive amount of income, they also succeeded in making the recording artist’s day-to-day livelihood a central aspect of the fan-artist relation. However, Ne Obliviscaris’ decision to be more fully transparent also opens them up to increasingly complex self-



monetizing and self-branding practices; it represents a deeper, more fractal, baroque integration of the artist with market imperatives, as their very selves are drawn into the Patreon platform's value-generating infrastructure. In this world, the "monetization of recording artists' private lives, always a facet of the music industries' star system, is rendered more explicit, intensive and personal" (Meier 2017:82). The Patreon model can then be interpreted as an example of the neoliberal imperative to drive valorization and accumulation into those aspects of cultural production which were previously considered off-limits and/or unmonetizable; e.g. the experiential, authentic and affective aspects of the artists themselves (Meier 2017:132-33).

The task for Ne Obliviscaris was then to follow through with their promises and develop their Patreon initiative in accordance with the expectations of their newly "empowered" fans. They were now expected to maintain a much more service-oriented role toward their patrons by engaging and supplying them with regular content, perquisites and experiences, and often in excess of their work as performers and songwriters. The neo-patronage relation therefore represents more than a series of simple exchanges and/or transactions among artists and fans; it is also indicative of new roles, identities and positionings for both—a development which is not without tension and contradiction (this will be a main theme in the coming chapters).

Ultimately, the burden, risk and responsibility in the Patreon model is placed entirely upon its "creators." The success of the neo-patronage relation then depends on the artist's ability to develop an ongoing, 'deep' engagement with their fans. In the business logic of Patreon, the music, art and/or services its "creators" provide are purely functional and "entirely instrumental" to the overall goal of capital accumulation—much

the same way, for example, how “content” is acquired and exploited by advertising and branding companies (Wernick 1991: 25–6, quoted in Meier 2017:86). In this dynamic, the Patreon platform is anything but a neutral intermediary; on the contrary, it is a profit-seeking political-economic entity with its own governing regulations and accumulation logic.

The next section will examine the Patreon model as part of the broader phenomena of platform capitalism as well as the neoliberal work formations (e.g. the ‘gig’ economy) with which such platforms appear fundamentally entangled. The purpose will be to examine how Ne Obliviscaris’ arguments concerning transparency, democracy and ethics in many ways point to a larger and more pressing question for recording artists entering this platform-mediated economic territory: namely, how and in what ways do online platform companies—and the Patreon model in particular—challenge, contradict and/or transform prevailing conceptions of creative work and recording artistry in particular?

## **Chapter 3: The Economics and Politics of the Patreon Platform**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter offers an analysis of the economics and politics of the neo-patronage crowdfunding platform Patreon. As the case of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon suggests, there are questions concerning how these platform companies are shaping the terms and conditions of work for creative producers as well as what types of economic relations they are confronting, engaging and adopting with the neo-patronage crowdfunding model. As a novel form of earning income in the culture industries, neo-patronage appears to be a more direct, practical and liberating means for creative producers to finance their work and attain income. For Ne Obliviscaris, their impassioned arguments in defense of their decision to use Patreon demonstrate their dedication to the neo-patronage model; they appear to have embraced its operational logic and to have adjusted their creative and professional lives in order to accommodate it and make it work for them.

Several questions guide the analysis of this chapter. First, how does the Patreon platform ‘fit’ into the broader political economy of platform capitalism, and more specifically, how does it make money? What does the neo-patronage model demand of creative and cultural producers and how do the economics and politics of online platforms more broadly, and the neo-patronage relation more specifically, condition the working lives of their users? In popular literature, online platforms are often associated with notions of individual empowerment through “collaborative” consumption (Albinsson and Perera 2018; Chase 2015; Botsman and Rogers 2011) and novel forms of

wealth creation (Sundararajan 2016; Evans and Schmalensee 2016; Rifkin 2014). The term “platform” conveys an image of an accessible space where social and economic activity might openly occur. Metaphorically, a platform “suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it” (Gillespie 2010: 350). As technological infrastructure, platforms represent “complicated mixtures of software, hardware, operations, and networks...they provide a set of shared techniques, technologies, and interfaces to a broad set of users” (Kenney and Zysman 2016: 64). In short, platforms are presented as technical, socio-economic formations which offer a variety of useful and beneficial affordances.

However, while platforms may be all of these things, they are primarily apparatuses of capital accumulation. As *platform companies*, they are corporate, monopolistic structures which seek to introduce and maintain relations of economic subordination, exploitation and expropriation in the course of accumulating capital. Consequently, they greatly structure and condition the roles and positionings of the producers operating within them as they are drawn into the wider valorization schemes of the platform economy. The popular perception of online platforms as “neutral” intermediaries is then complicated by the relations of power and control which define how producers are positioned in the platform model. This chapter therefore approaches online platforms—and neo-patronage crowdfunding model in particular—as political-economic entities whose valorization processes draw creative and cultural producers into novel relations of capital accumulation.

This chapter will first analyze the neo-patronage crowdfunding model within the wider economic terrain of “platform capitalism” (Srnicek 2017; Cole 2017; Langley and

Leyshon 2017a; Lobo 2014).<sup>48</sup> Platform capitalism is defined as a system modeled to accumulate capital from the online exchanges of networked producers and consumers. Within this system, platform companies are positioned as corporate-technological apparatuses designed to facilitate, control and profit from these exchanges. Accordingly, a “platform is a *mediator* rather than an intermediary: it shapes the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them” (Van Dijck 2013: 29). Platform companies therefore establish the terms of use which govern both productive and consumptive activity in the platform relation. With the goal of capital accumulation, platforms do much more than “enable” transactions; they structure and ultimately seek to profit from them by owning and controlling the terrain upon which they occur.

According to Nick Srnicek (2017), online platform companies can be grouped into five categories: advertising platforms (e.g. Facebook, Google, Twitter), cloud platforms (e.g. Amazon Web Services, Dropbox, Adobe Creative Cloud, Wordpress), industrial platforms (e.g. IBM, Intel, Microsoft), product platforms (e.g. Netflix, Spotify, iTunes) and lean platforms (Uber, Airbnb and Patreon), nearly all of which—directly or indirectly—accumulate capital through the extraction of rent, surplus value or some combination of the two. While these categories do have some overlapping characteristics, the binding thread among them is that “the capitalist class owns the platform, not necessarily that it produces a physical product” (Srnicek 2017: 49). In other words, at their core, platform companies are political-economic apparatuses designed to accumulate capital from some form of platform-mediated exchange, service or asset.

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<sup>48</sup> The term was first coined as “Plattform-Kapitalismus” by journalist Sacha Lobo, who proposed it as a more precise way of describing how so-called “sharing” economy platforms effectively deepen and extend economically exploitative class relations (rather than transcend them) (Lobo 2014).

Considering Srnicek’s typology, the analytical focus of this section will be on “lean” platform companies (of which Patreon is a primary example). According to him, lean platforms “operate through a hyper-outsourced model, whereby workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced, maintenance costs are outsourced, and training is outsourced... All that remains is a bare extractive minimum – control over the platform that enables a monopoly rent to be gained” (Srnicek, 2017: 76). This description corresponds to what Evans and Gawer call “transaction platforms,” or those platforms which act “as a conduit...facilitating exchange or transactions between different users, buyers, or suppliers” (Evans and Gawer 2016:9). Lean platform companies employ a model similar to some established “offline” businesses (e.g. temporary staffing agencies, real estate agencies, entertainment booking agencies, art galleries and so on) who charge fees for matching buyers and sellers and/or producers and consumers with one another. By targeting some kind of social activity, service and/or asset and drawing it into the accumulation framework of the platform model, these platform companies similarly mediate the transactions, interactions and exchanges of external users for profit (Srnicek 2017: 78).<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, lean platform companies within this system follow a specific accumulation logic, whereby *market making* strategies and tactics are instituted for the purpose of extracting rent and/or surplus-value.

“Market-making” is interpreted in this analysis as the strategic extension, or imposition of the capital relation into new, untapped and unrealized spaces of socio-economic activity. It is the process of creating a market—first, by drawing individual

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<sup>49</sup> Lean platform companies are among the largest in terms of user base and revenue. Some prime examples include Uber with 3.9 million drivers worldwide and USD\$11.3 billion in revenue (Iqbal 2019)) and AirBnb with 650,000 “hosts” (e.g. property owners) worldwide and USD\$3.6 billion in revenue (Ipropertymanagement 2020).

producers into the platform-mediated relation in order to interact and exchange with consumers; and second, by establishing mechanisms by which to profit from those interactions and exchanges. As a form of primitive accumulation, market-making represents the unceasing expansion of the capital relation into ever-new social and productive life-activities; one which “drives it to reproduce (at increasing scale) the separation between means of production and producers” (De Angelis 2001:9).

Consequently, market-making is also a form of expropriation; it “presupposes a complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realisation of their labour” by introducing an accumulation model which sustains an exploitative class relation (Marx 1982: 874). Market-making embodies this transitory, “primitive” logic of the capital relation as it penetrates new territories and spaces for accumulation.

Lean platform companies profit by instituting rent-seeking and/or surplus-value extracting practices. Considering the former, capital is accumulated in the form of rent extracted primarily from charging transaction fees. This is the model that platforms like Patreon and Airbnb use. Similarly, advertising platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) also charge a form of rent to advertisers, marketers or anyone else seeking access to a platform’s user base. In each of these cases, the platform company is collecting a rent in return for access to the platform’s affordances and capacities, either in the form of the platform’s “product” (e.g. the digital tools and support services which assist in mediating access to producers and/or consumers) or in the form of access to the users themselves (or more specifically, their attention). In these instances, the platform company is not actively controlling a labor process, nor realizing surplus value from productive labor; they are collecting rent for mediating access to a service, experience, asset, or audience.

The emergence and spread of lean online platforms are in particular representative of a broader turn towards rent-seeking business models in recent decades. According to economist Guy Standing, this phenomena can be interpreted as another form of “rentier capitalism,” which he defines as “the existence of a system in which the return [of value] to private property rights exceeds the return [of value] to production” (Standing 2018). In other words, rentierism is capital accumulation centered on the appropriation of *existing wealth* derived from the ownership, control and exploitation of properties and assets, in contrast to accumulation centered on surplus value realized from productive labor (e.g. from producing commodities like recorded music, smart phones, wheat etc.). Rent-seeking accumulation practices have become pervasive in many economic sectors. From the student loan “industry,” to finance (mortgages) and credit (cards), to intellectual property (trademarks and patents) to online platforms, rentiers gain income through the “possession of assets, rather than from labour” (Standing 2016: ch. 1).<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, some lean platform companies generate revenue from mediating labor services which produce surplus value; or more specifically, they realize surplus value from mediating the productive activity of independent contractors who use the platform to locate and perform discrete services or tasks for consumers.<sup>51</sup> Examples

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<sup>50</sup> In credit markets specifically, Lazzarato notes that the wider outcome is a “debt economy,” wherein “[a]ll of modern-day capitalist accumulation is...comparable to rent” as the maintenance and securitization of debt becomes a central means of wealth appropriation (Lazzarato 2012: 21).

<sup>51</sup> Advertising platforms also profit from surplus value generated from productive labor. Facebook, for example, collects data on user activities and sells it to marketers for “targeted” advertising purposes. Likewise, Google Marketing’s platform “tool” (known as Google Analytics) tracks, evaluates and commodifies internet traffic and user data. In both these examples, the company employees who are tasked with gathering, analyzing and packaging data undertake productive, surplus-value generating labor *within* the company. When an advertising platform adopts and utilizes this model, the “work it formally exploits, and thus the value it directly produces, is the result of its processing and packaging of this content mostly for its primary clients: advertisers and marketers” (Comor 2015: 17). Therefore, “the activities of those who produce the means of extraction and process those raw materials – those



include companies like Uber (who mediate producers of ride-services with consumers of those services) or Grubhub (who mediate producers of food delivery services with consumers of those services). For these platform types, surplus value is extracted and realized through the exploitation of *piecework* labor (Marx 1982 692-700). Specifically, these platform companies pay a piecework wage/rate to independent contractors for performing a specific task, each of which embodies a singular production process.<sup>52</sup> The company then profits by setting the piece rate to the lowest level possible, in order to extract a surplus based on the difference between that rate and the operational costs (constant capital) involved in the transaction.<sup>53</sup> In the platform relation, each piecework job then corresponds to a discrete task mediated by the platform, rather than the production of an individual physical good; in other words, “the commodity produced is the change of place itself” (Cole 2017). However, as with physical goods, the “quality of the labour is here controlled by the work itself, which must be of good average quality if the piece-price is to be paid in full. Piece-wages become, from this point of view, the

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who design the user interfaces, write the algorithms, package and sell the analytics – can be classified as [productive] labour” (Cole 2017).

<sup>52</sup> Piecework rates are effective for economically exploiting workers individually engaged in an indeterminate number of repetitive, one-off tasks. This is certainly the case with Uber drivers, as their earnings are only maximized by completing as many individual drives as possible as quickly possible. Accordingly, “[s]ince the quality and intensity of the work are here controlled by the very form of the wage, superintendence of labour becomes to a great extent superfluous” (Marx 1982: 694). It is then “naturally in the personal interest of the worker that he should strain his labour-power as intensely as possible; this in turn enables the capitalist to raise the normal degree of intensity of labour more easily. Moreover, the lengthening of the working day is now in the personal interest of the worker, since with it his daily or weekly wages rise” (Marx 1982:695). The key difference then with lean platforms like Uber (which rely heavily on the surplus-value extracting model), is that they *set the pay rates* according to which drivers either agree to, or not.

<sup>53</sup> Consequently, the “proportion between wages and surplus value remains unaltered, since the mass of surplus labour supplied by each particular worker corresponds with the wage he receives. But the wider scope that piece-wages give to individuality tends to develop both that individuality, and with it the worker's sense of liberty, independence and self-control, and also the competition of workers with each other. The piece-wage therefore has a tendency, while raising the wages of individuals above the average, to lower this average itself” (Marx 1982:697).

most fruitful source of reductions in wages, and of frauds committed by the capitalists” (Marx 1982: 694). In acquiescing to the piece-rate model, contracted producers should then expect to supply all their own materials (e.g. a car, bike, cell phone), receive no benefits (minimum wage or overtime pay) and accept all the intrinsic burdens and costs of the relation.

In the case of the Patreon platform, the primary accumulation model is *rent-seeking*. As the company with first mover advantage in the neo-patronage crowdfunding sector, Patreon identified the market potential of mediating cultural producers’ economic relations with online patrons. They then ‘made the market’—first, by attracting producers and patrons onto the platform and into the neo-patronage relation; secondly, by controlling and mediating the financial transactions from patrons to producers; and then thirdly by extracting rent from those transactions in the form of charges and fees. Patreon is therefore not unlike other online platforms which operate according to a similar accumulation logic. However, what does make the Patreon model unique is that beneath these valorization imperatives, it is built on the edifice of an old tradition—patronage—which it conjures and reconfigures as a platform-mediated relation.

The second half of this chapter then analyzes the politics of the neo-patronage crowdfunding relation. Using the case of the Patreon company, it seeks to reveal what the neo-patronage crowdfunding relation *formally* and *informally* requires of its so-called “creators.” It is an analysis of the power relations of the platform, as outlined through its stated terms and conditions, which collectively embody Patreon’s “governing protocols,” or those “set of instructions that users are forced to obey if they want to partake in the mediated flow of interaction” (Van Dijck 2013:31). The intention is to reveal how the

Patreon platform’s terms of use align its so-called “creators” with the economic logic and profit-seeking goals of the platform. It examines how Patreon—in light of Ne Obliviscaris’ own claims that it represents a more “ethical,” “empowering” and “democratic” model of remunerating artists—may or may not indicate a departure from the economically exploitative conditions and conventional antagonisms long encountered by recording artists and other cultural producers. Key to this analysis is decoding what Schwarz (2017) would call Patreon’s “platform logic,” as well as the values Patreon expresses in order to construct narratives which reinforce and rationalize the neo-patronage model as a beneficial endeavor.<sup>54</sup>

In sum, this chapter suggests that online platform companies like Patreon appear to perpetuate long-standing power disparities in the culture industries by concentrating the burdens of production more squarely upon creative and cultural producers. Moreover, it will draw insights on the extent to which the neo-patronage model ‘fits’ within the broader category of platform capitalism, and how it is impacting the occupational lives and cultural products/output of recording artists like Ne Obliviscaris. Ultimately, the goal is to reveal Patreon’s inner machinations and operational logic in order to assess if and how they are drawing “creators” into more *entrepreneurial*, *dependent* and exploitative relations with capital.

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<sup>54</sup> According to Schwarz, “platform logic” denotes the “interplay between different mechanics inherent to digital platforms, found on different conceptual and topological levels: micro, meso and macro” (Schwarz 2017: 278). In the case of Patreon, this “logic” is expressed at the “macro” level through the structural conditions of platform capitalism, where agents (as “creators”) are legally positioned as independent contractors in the platform relation. On the micro level, these conditions are expressed through everyday rules and practices which govern the material conditions of the platform relation—namely Patreon’s own terms of use and the roles “creators” are expected to take on in “servicing” their patrons.

## 3.2 Platform Capitalism

### The Platform Business Model

Online platforms, or more specifically—platform companies—are technological apparatuses of capital accumulation that aim to identify, create and control niche sectors of socio-economic activity; they ‘make markets’ by providing the digital tools and infrastructure for producers and consumers to engage one another through the platform business model. Accordingly, once “a platform positions itself...between users...as the ground upon which their activities occur,” it is then potentially capable of controlling and directing those activities towards profitable ends (Srnicsek 2017: 44). On one hand, “the ground” is the technical, proprietary and operational architecture of the platform: the networks, servers and intellectual property (algorithms and data) which comprise the material infrastructure of the platform as a product, as well as the employees who operate and support it (e.g. code-writers, product developers, customer service agents, managers and so on). On the other, it is the broader platform ecosystem as well as the legal, economic and political apparatuses which sanction and reinforce it. Within this framework, platform companies—as market-makers backed by significant venture capital—seek to monetize the interactions and exchanges of the producers and consumers using their networks (Nieborg and Poell 2018: 4277-4278).

In popular economic and business narrative, online platforms are described in generally positive terms (Evans 2016; Chase 2015; Choudary 2015). They are characterized as dynamic, “powerful” technologies which create “great value for society and fortunes for their entrepreneurs and investors” (Evans and Schmalensee 2016: ch. 1).

According to one influential text in the business literature, they are responsible for a “revolution” that is “radically changing business, the economy, and society at large” (Parker et al 2016: ch. 1); they are “value enablers” that “consummate matches among users and facilitate the exchange of goods, services, or social currency, thereby enabling value creation for all participants” (Parker et al 2016: ch. 1). In these accounts and others, online platforms are portrayed as socially and economically beneficial entities, whose purported wealth-creating capacities “for society” are inherent in their design and purpose. Accordingly, there is a seeming *neutrality* to the platform model; it affords the interactions which ostensibly create some kind of “value” for all participants by virtue of its “intermediating” capabilities. In this world, platforms are the critical architecture and framework upon which external producers and consumers might convene, satisfy needs and create wealth.

These views are echoed by platform theorist Sangeet Paul Choudary, who claims that “[o]n platforms, the business does not create the end value; rather, the business only enables value creation” (Choudary 2015 sec 1.1). This statement in particular emphasizes how the term “value” is frequently and emphatically used in discussions of platform capitalism, yet its specificity is often left ill-defined. In both the business literature and in scholarly research, vague, general references to “value” often beg clarification (e.g. “[m]ultisided platforms can create great value” (Evans and Schmalensee 2016:9), or “appropriating value from property” (Langley and Leyshon 2017a: 23). This lack of specificity may stem from the fact that different types of platform companies profit from different accumulation models. As described above, some lean platform companies (like Patreon) derive revenue primarily from rent-seeking practices. In this case, the “end

value” referred to in Choudary’s statement would take the form of an unproductive rent. Moreover, some lean platform companies (like Uber) extract and realize surplus value from productive labor. In this case, the “value”—which Choudary claims is ‘enabled by the platform business’—takes the definite form of surplus value (which in turn is only “enabled” by the exploitation of human labor power drawn into the platform’s piecework production process).

Online platforms are also depicted as enabling a “collaborative economy” (Albinsson and Perera 2018; Botsman and Rogers 2011); one whereby producers and consumers might “co-create” on the platform through peer-to-peer activities and transactions (Smedlund et al 2018). This is the driving thesis of Zipcar founder Robin Chase’s text “Peers Inc.,” wherein the platform model is extolled for its ability to ‘leverage excess capacity’ while also “empower[ing] the participating peers” in the process (Chase 2015: ch 2). As she explains, “the point of a platform is to liberate the value hidden in excess capacity by engaging others...Making use of excess capacity is fundamentally a collaborative act. It is sharing” (Chase 2015: ch. 3). Through acts of independent collaboration, platform users can put their “excess capacity” to productive use by performing random gigs or “sharing” assets in order to earn extra income, while simultaneously reducing transaction costs and inefficiencies for consumers (Evans and Gawer 2016: 4). When applied across a multiplicity of market sectors—e.g. labor services (TaskRabbit, Handy), ride services (Uber, Lyft) or lodging (Airbnb, Homeaway)—the outcome is interpreted as a broader “peer economy” of platform-enabled exchange. In the business world, the platform model represents an idealized,

frictionless set of market-relations, whereby individual entrepreneurs are seamlessly and non-preferentially matched with willing consumers.

Collectively, these narratives echo the “California ideology” pervasive among Silicon valley-based platform companies, which dictates that market inefficiencies can be overcome and/or eliminated through the “disintermediating” and “empowering” capacities of applied information technology. It is an ideology which echoes the techno-utopian belief that “technological innovation, combined with deregulation and capitalism, are both essential and sufficient to ensure the public good” (Levina and Hasinoff 2017:490). As an ethos subscribing to unconventional and “disruptive” business practices, it “combines a distrust of institutional structures with a deep belief in the potential of technology for social change” (despite the fact that such “institutional structures” are entirely necessary in order to introduce, support and regulate such change) (Marwick 2018: 3). Consequently, terms like “peer,” “collaborative” and “sharing” take hold as platform-model narratives, despite the fact “there has been no abolition of private property or establishment of mass communal ownership” whatsoever (Booth 2015).<sup>55</sup> In the case of Patreon specifically, it is an ideology expressed through the conviction that the neo-patronage platform “unshackles” creative producers from dependency on conventional market actors (e.g. record labels, publishers, galleries etc.) so that they might become more autonomous, self-sufficient and entrepreneurial individuals. As Patreon claims in their mission statement, their so-called “creators” depend on them for

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<sup>55</sup> According to Booth, the “main “revolution” of the “sharing” economy has been to turn personal property into private property – that is, to turn the personal property of millions of ordinary people (homes, cars, etc.) into a source of profits for the capitalists. Put simply, it is the mass conversion of small-scale personal property into capital” (Booth 2015).

both remuneration *and* liberation: “We’re proud and motivated that creators rely on us for their paycheck, and ultimately, their creative freedom” (Patreon 2020a). The self-rationalizing ideology of the platform model presupposes its effectiveness and fairness for all; the purported benefits then outweigh everything else.

Consequently, California ideology “naturalizes and universalizes” platform companies’ underlying accumulation imperatives (Eagleton 1991: 5). It is ideology which not only celebrates the “empowering” capacities of the platform model for individuals, but confirms and reinforces the material and class interests of platform companies and those of capital more broadly. As an operational logic of Silicon Valley, it engages “the wants and desires that people already have, catching up genuine hopes and needs...and feed[s] them back to their subjects in ways which render these ideologies plausible and attractive” (Eagleton 1991: 15). The platform model’s apparent disintermediating and empowering affordances for individual producers and consumers then appear to ‘go without saying’—just as they simultaneously benefit platform companies’ bottom lines. For labor-mediating platforms specifically, California ideology produces techno-utopian narratives which often accentuate their capacity to liberate workers from old conventions and constraints. These narratives provide a celebratory veneer which serves to minimize and wash over material conditions of class exploitation in platform capitalism—conditions which are de-historicized and presented as “natural” processes seemingly beyond anyone’s control (as, for example when under- and unemployment are rationalized as the unavoidable outcome of legitimate socio-economic processes). At the same time however, these narratives present a solution in the form of the platform relation and its ostensibly empowering affordances—affordances which also appear to



originate from natural, systemic economic conditions. Consequently, “there is a kind of dissembling or duplicity built into the very economic structures of capitalism...Mystification, so to speak, is an 'objective' fact embedded in the very character of the system” (Eagleton 1991 86).

Frank Pasquale highlights the utopian character of these narratives by contrasting them with Marx’s famous description of an ideal division of labor:

According to some thought leaders in Silicon Valley, global platforms for labor and services will provide extraordinary opportunities for workers. A “peer economy” of platform-arranged production will break down old hierarchies. Gig workers will be able to knit Etsy scarves in the morning, drive Uber cars in the afternoon, and write Facebook comments at night, flexibly shifting between jobs and leisure at will. (Pasquale 2016:312-13)

When comparing this statement to Marx’s original text, the parallels between California ideology and traditional communist ideals appear strangely convergent: “...in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow” (Marx and Engels 2004: p. 53). Narratives of the ‘gig’ and collaborative economy also draw on these enduring themes of autonomy, flexibility and self-fulfillment; they present platform-enabled work as a field of open opportunity where “each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes.” There are however two very different types of freedom being emphasized in these perspectives: on one hand, Marx is appealing to freedom as a humanist ideal, whereby individuals might engage a variety of life-activities in pursuit of self-fulfillment (in contrast to performing alienated tasks in a wage labor relation). On the other, California ideology adheres to a distinctly *market-defined* conception of freedom;

one which ironically recasts the communist ideals of the former as attributes of entrepreneurial individualism, defined as the “freedom” to engage online platforms in pursuit of economic self-fulfillment.

In contrast to these business-driven perspectives, there are a number of “counternarratives” more critical of the platform model (Pasqual 2016:311). These narratives present a darker vision of platform companies, citing their monopolizing tendencies, impact on labor conditions, social relations and the public good. In the aftermath of the 2007-2008 economic crisis, expanding austerity policies combined with corporate outsourcing and subcontracting contributed to the degradation and decline of more stable, full-time work categories (Srnicek 2017: 32).<sup>56</sup> As a result of these structural shifts, vulnerable populations facing uncertain employment conditions were compelled to seek out work from unconventional sources, such as the ‘gig’ work afforded through then-emerging platform companies like Uber (Srnicek 2017: 32).<sup>57</sup> For some, this type of casual, contract-based work was a better fit to their lifestyle, offering more autonomy, flexible working hours and extra income.<sup>58</sup> For critics, however, these are perceived as

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<sup>56</sup> As Booth explains, the “crash and crisis were necessary to create the conditions that these new business models could thrive in: mass unemployment; austerity and impoverishment; and growing inequality. In this respect, the rise of the “sharing” economy and the on-demand economy is not the product of any individual genius, as the capitalists would like to claim, but – again – a reflection of the impasse, stagnation, and crisis of the capitalist system” (Booth 2015).

<sup>57</sup> Statistics estimating the number of workers involved in some kind of platform labor vary, but generally place it in the area of 1% to 5% of the working population. In Europe for example, one report found that 2.3% of respondents “provided services via platforms as their main job” (Pesole et al 2018). In the United Kingdom, another report found that 4.4% of working people over the age of 18 undertook some kind of platform-mediated work over the previous 12 months (Lepänjuuri et al 2018). In the United States, as of May 2017, the number of Americans involved in platform-mediated ‘gig’ work—or what the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics terms “electronically mediated work”—stood at 1.6 million, or 1.0 percent of total employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

<sup>58</sup> For example, one recent study found that Uber drivers working in London had “higher average levels of life satisfaction” compared to other workers in the city—despite also experiencing increased levels of anxiety and lower rates of pay (Berger et al 2019:27). In this case, the authors found that the flexibility and autonomy of being an Uber driver outweighed the inherent stress and uncertainty of

fleeting attributes; ones which are eclipsed over the long term by precarious conditions, characterized by relatively low paying, sporadic one-off gigs and little-to-no training, health care or retirement options (Muntaner 2018; Boitnott 2018; Huws 2014).

Recent research on the experiences of workers in the gig economy found that platforms accelerate the wider “disaggregation” of work from more stable institutional structures in favor of more intermittent piecework and one-off ‘tasks’ (Bajwa et al 2018). A study by the Pew Research Center found that seeking out “gig work” (on labor platforms like Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and Taskrabbit) has become a necessity for a growing number of marginalized workers unable to find more stable employment (Smith 2016). Notably, “[s]ome 60% of labor platform users say that the money they earn from these sites is “essential” or “important” to their overall financial situations.” They are also “more likely to come from low-income households, to be non-white and to have not attended college” (Smith 2016). Even on platforms catering to those with more “professional” skills (e.g. Freelancer, Fivvr, and Upwork), users must often provide their own tools and “research” time, be subject to changes in the terms and conditions without notice, cover their own insurance and pensions, and open themselves up to the self-discipline of reputational-based feedback monitoring (Vigo 2018; Hearn 2017; Slee 2016). As Van Doorn explains, “[s]uch ratings have become a major decentralized and scalable management technique that outsources quality control to customers of on-demand platforms, creating a generalized audit culture in which service providers are continually pushed to self-optimize” (Van Doorn 2017: 903). As users enter into this relation with the platform, they are also expected to “be loyal” to its “internal, algorithmic

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intermittent, contract-based work, thus highlighting the power of non-monetary and subjective factors in the platform relation.

assessment of [their] own success,” particularly if they wish the relation to be financially rewarding (Weatherby 2018). Moreover, the employment and legal status of many platform workers is also an ongoing question, as exhibited in the continuing debate over whether ‘gig’ workers should be designated employees, as opposed to independent contractors (this issue will be explored in more detail below) (Chen 2019; Bosqued and Abellan-Matamorosmith 2019; Butler 2018; Malos et al 2018).

Considering these developments, the question is then *what kind* of empowerment and/or liberation is being presented in California ideology? Is it "a creativity and autonomy that liberates humanity to see beyond commodity-framed relations and reified individual identities or does it, instead, ultimately co-opt and pacify?" (Comor 2010 317). In the case of labor and service-mediating platforms, the answer would appear to be the latter. Although platform workers may very well feel liberated and/or empowered in both the creative and economic sense, their productive activities are still undertaken and shaped according to the rules, pressures and limitations of the capitalist marketplace. In other words, the platform relation still "reflects and develops" the "abstract power of private property and social relations mediated by contracts and the price system" (Comor 2010: 319). Therefore, while there may be a “revolution” of sorts when compared to previous production regimes (e.g. Fordism), it is still one which finds its primary expression within the form of the capital relation. In the case of the neo-patronage model, "creators"—despite being in a seemingly direct relation with their patrons (as mediated by Patreon)—are still dependent upon an exchange relation. While it is not *explicitly* required, the neo-patronage relation is still implicitly based on some kind of reciprocity between “creators” and patrons, whereby some modicum of interaction and/or “rewards”

are provided in exchange for financial support. It is then understood that if “creators” fail to interact with or provide varying degrees of patron-only access, experiences or gifts, it would likely reduce the amount of income they receive. Patreon's *raison d'être* is based on the sustainability of this ongoing exchange relation; therefore both "creator" and company have a vested interest in ‘perpetuating existing material relations’ (Comor 2010: 320).

From a more critical perspective, the term “platform capitalism” best describes the platform business model as a form of capital accumulation where profits are derived from controlling and mediating access to online producer-consumer exchange networks (Srnicsek 2017; Langley and Leyshon 2017a). It shifts focus away from mainstream and business-driven “collaborative economy” narratives by approaching online platforms as powerful, monopolistic technology companies backed by large amounts of venture capital. Platform companies’ guiding imperative is to monetize the exchanges and interactions occurring on their networks; they are driven by an accumulation logic that is quite different from the celebratory “sharing” narratives which so often populate the business and popular literature. Platform companies therefore engage in market-making practices, which can be interpreted as the process of extending the capital relation into new spheres of socio-productive activity with goal of extracting rent and/or surplus value.

### **Market-Making, Platform Scaling and Venture Capital**

Platform companies make markets by introducing the capital relation into unexploited and/or failed spheres of production and instituting rent-seeking and/or

surplus value-extracting practices and relations. In the context of platform capitalism, the impetus to market-making can be seen as a form of primitive accumulation; it is an example of the “continuous character” of the capital relation as it penetrates and colonizes ever-new spaces and forms of socio-economic activity (De Angelis 2001). Primitive accumulation is a form of class expropriation. According to Marx (1982), it is a “process” which first separates workers from owning and controlling the means and conditions of their own subsistence and reproduction, and secondly, draws them into capitalist production processes. Accordingly: “[a]s soon as capitalist production stands on its own feet, it not only maintains this separation, but reproduces it on a constantly extending scale...So-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Marx 1982: 874-75). In platform capitalism, the platform company demonstrates this accumulation process by targeting and enclosing upon untapped spheres of socio-economic activity, and then establishing ownership and control over the *means* through which producers and consumers might access and engage that activity. Market-making is therefore an example of capital’s unceasing drive to constitute ever-new productive forms and relations for purposes of accumulation. In the case of Patreon, the company foresaw the potential profitability of taking an “old” concept—patronage—and reformatting it as a platform-mediated activity geared towards rent-extraction. By erecting a virtual tollbooth between producers and a key source of income, Patreon effectively created a market within the sphere of platform-mediated cultural production where none previously existed.

In practice, platform companies make a market by *scaling* their businesses. Scaling represents the quantitative growth of the platform in terms of both users and

revenue. A platform begins this process by first delineating a “market network niche” and then drawing the socio-economic exchanges within that market into the platform’s accumulation framework (Langley and Leyshon 2017a:21). A platform may scale either incrementally or exponentially based on varying factors such as a company’s marketing strategy, perceived reputation and/or social utility. Scaling is then effected by raising the aggregate number of exchanges mediated by the platform to a “critical mass” level, defined by Choudary as the “point at which there is enough overlap between supply and demand to sustainably enable interactions” (Choudary 2015 4.1). Theoretically, this “overlap” will spark a “virtuous feedback loop” of interactivity—a process called *network effects*. (Choudary 2016: 1.5). When network effects begin to take hold, “the value created and the profit margins of the platform owner both increase as more users join the ecosystem” (Kohler 2018: 101). A platform successfully “scales” when the aggregate number of exchanges occurring on the platform then occur at a rate which produces sustainable, ongoing revenue.

Platform businesses have fewer fixed, variable and marginal costs, permitting them to scale with more flexibility and speed than traditional companies.<sup>59</sup> As the platform grows, these companies do not need to invest large amounts of money in purchasing and maintaining inventory, building or renting property or hiring more and more workers. Instead, scaling is dependent on the platform’s capacity to accumulate

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<sup>59</sup> The ride-sharing platform Uber provides a useful example. In 2011, Uber was a relatively small player; the company operated in only a handful of U.S. cities and still had less than ten thousand customers bringing in USD\$1.8 million in net revenue (Lashinsky 2017). However, the buzz around the company was substantial enough to attract massive amounts of venture capital (including USD\$258 million from Google Ventures in 2013), which in turn was used to aggressively promote the company, drive scale and fight off both rivals and regulators (Wilhelm and Tsotsis 2013). By 2014, the platform was operating internationally in 262 markets, while the number of “active drivers” using the platform expanded “from basically zero in mid-2012 to over 160,000 at the end of 2014” (Solomon 2015).

capital from the exchanges of the external, independent producers and consumers using their networks. For lean platform companies in particular, “assets, knowledge, and labour in circulation are non-proprietary and decentralised,” providing an unrestricted pool of resources for the platform to aggregate and exploit (Langley and Leyshon 2017a:22). In business parlance, this tactic is referred to as “distributed resourcing,” because the bulk of the work in building and maintaining the platform is effectively “decentralized” to crowdsourced producers and consumers (Kohler 2018: 99). In the case of Patreon, “creators” are drawn into the platform relation lured by the promise of a new revenue stream (in the form of the neo-patronage relation). These “creators” then promote the concept of the Patreon model to their supporters in hopes of convincing them to become patrons. As more and more patrons join the platform, the cycle of network effects continues, thereby generating income for Patreon “creators” and revenue for Patreon.

A platform company’s ability to scale is also dependent on acquiring *venture capital* (Langley and Leyshon 2017a; Standing 2017 Ch. 6). In exchange for equity, venture capital investors finance the early years of a platform’s existence, allowing the company to operate at a loss as it works to generate revenue, fight off or acquire competitors and ultimately “make” a profitable market. According to Langley and Leshon, the “platform business model performs the temporal structure of venture capital funds” (Langley and Leshon 2017a: 24). In other words, it serves as a template through which a platform’s capacity to rapidly scale within a specific time frame can be converted into future revenue streams; consequently, “the business model makes rent extraction appear viable for platform intermediaries that quickly scale, so it performs the growth trajectory of start-up firms that is valorised by venture capital” (Langley and Leshon



2017a: 24). In contrast to more standard equity investment models (where dividends may trickle in over a longer period of time from investments in more mature, established companies), venture capitalists take on more risk in unproven, fledgling start-ups in the technology sector.<sup>60</sup> The anticipation is that the millions of dollars they put into promising, young technology, software and/or platform companies will allow investors to substantially ‘cash in’ within several years, either through a liquidity event (e.g. an initial public offering) or through an acquisition by a larger company (e.g. Alphabet or Facebook). In the case of Patreon, the venture capital secured over its first year was essential in helping it quickly dominate the emerging market for neo-patronage crowdfunding.<sup>61</sup> Later, it was important in helping Patreon acquire a potential rival (the

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<sup>60</sup> As part of a high risk/high reward strategy, venture capitalists target emerging companies with so-called “home run” potential; e.g. those whose rate of return is so exceptional that they exceed and outperform all other investments in an investors portfolio (Langley and Leshon 2017a: 24). The most successful of these are considered “unicorns”, defined as those companies which attain valuations of USD\$1 billion or more. The term comes from (what was once) their rarity (Lee 2013). However, as of February 2020, there are at least 575 companies which are now considered unicorns (Techcrunch 2020). On one hand, companies reach this status by attracting large amounts of investment capital and using it to rapidly drive expansion and increase revenue. This was the case with the language-learning application Duolingo, which achieved a unicorn level valuation of USD\$1.5 billion in 2019 after six rounds of venture capital funding over seven years (Meisenzahl 2019). On the other hand, a company can also become a unicorn through acquisition by a larger entity, as for example when Facebook purchased Instagram for USD\$1 billion in 2012 (Hayes 2020).

<sup>61</sup> In 2013, Patreon received an initial investment offer of USD\$700,000 from Josh Felser of Freestyle Ventures. This drew the attention of other venture capital firms, who then brought the total amount to USD\$2.1 million in the first seed round (Peckham 2019; Gannes 2013). By May of 2014, company revenue was doubling every month; Patreon was transferring more than USD\$1.5 million to an estimated 18,000 creators on the platform, while adding new creators at a rate of 150 a day (Hudson 2014). In 2014, Patreon announced that it had secured USD\$15 million in series A venture funding, which (among other things) permitted the company to move into a new office, hire more staff, expand its services (Buhr 2014; McMillan 2014). In January of 2016, Patreon reported a series B funding round total of USD\$30 million led by Thrive capital, putting the total raised to USD\$47.1 million (Buhr 2016). In May 2017, Patreon reached another milestone, announcing it had gained a total of one million paying patrons contributing roughly USD\$150 million to 50,000 active creators. Among them, at least thirty-five creators were “making more than \$150,000” while “thousands [were earning] more than \$25,000” annually (Constine 2017). In September of 2017, Patreon then secured USD\$60 million more in series C funding (once more led by Thrive capital), bringing the total investment to USD\$107 million (Constine 2017a).

video subscription service Subbable, for an undisclosed sum in 2015 (Pham 2015)), as well as companies whose technologies complimented Patreon's own operations (as for example, the subscription membership platform Memberful (Constine 2018) and the merchandise logistics platform Kit (both for undisclosed terms in 2018) (Constine 2018a)).

In sum, market-making is a concrete expression of platform capitalism's accumulation logic. It is exercised through the business imperatives of platform scaling, generating positive network effects and securing venture capital. However, it is perhaps most heavily dependent on harnessing and leveraging the power of what can generally be called *platform labor*; or in other words, the capacities of individual producers whose labor power, assets and creative energies represent the fundamental source of revenue in the platform accumulation model.

### **Platform Labor**

When examining the institutional makeup of lean platform companies, what is most notable is that the aggregated producers working through the platform relation are not employees. Instead, they are considered (and legally treated as) external, independent contractors who represent the productive inputs of platform accumulation yet remain outside the operating core of the platform company. By externalizing the costs involved with building, training and maintaining a laboring division *within* the company, platforms can turn attention towards their primary goal: facilitating and monetizing the platform-mediated exchanges these external producers have with consumers. As a result of this labor-outsourcing model, platform companies can sometimes "disrupt" incumbent

industries. They re-mediate a specific socio-economic practice through the platform relation, effectively circumventing many of the legal, temporal and spatial barriers faced by traditional companies; or in business-speak, they eliminate their “inefficiencies” by “playing regulatory arbitrage, repackaging work, or repositioning power in the economic system” (Kenney and Zysman 2016: 66).

The Patreon platform is also reliant on externalizing and “hyper-outsourcing” as much of the work, burden and risk of production as possible upon its so-called “creators” (Srnieck 2017:76). The expectation is that those who want to thrive on the platform should develop their own patronage networks, promote themselves and actively “draw those who donate money into the entrepreneurial trajectories of their projects” (Langley and Leyshon 2017a: 18). After all, they are not only responsible for selling the neo-patronage relation to their fans, they must also produce the affective and material content which keeps patrons continually engaged in the relation. This is demonstrated most explicitly by Ne Obliviscaris’ own Patreon introductory pitch, as well as through the subsequent arguments and claims the band made in order to rationalize and normalize the neo-patronage relation to their critics, sceptics and fans alike. Once they had an identifiable stake in the Patreon relation, Ne Obliviscaris acted the role of platform cheerleader accordingly (as for example, when band leader Tim Charles initiated an ongoing public defense of Patreon via social media, conference presentations and press interviews).

Patreon’s use of the term “creator” is likely intentional. It appears to explicitly brand and/or associate its external contractors as members of Richard Florida’s (2012) much-vaunted “creative class.” In his view, the “Creative Class is the norm-setting class

of our time”; one whose values of “[i]ndividuality, self-expression, and openness to difference are favored over...homogeneity, conformity, and “fitting in””(Florida 2012:10). In contrast to those who are “paid to do routine, mostly physical work,” creative class workers are “paid to use their minds—the full scope of their cognitive and social skills” (Florida 2012: 9). Patreon’s explicit designation of its users as “creators” echoes this celebratory “creative class” rhetoric; it presents their platform as a portal to creative and financial independence through expressive, non-alienating work for ‘one’s self’.

The term “creator” is therefore problematic; its uniformly positive connotations belie the complexity and contradictory status of creative work in the context of the neo-patronage relation. In the context of this dissertation, a more specific and fitting description is *fundraiser*, a term which better describes these cultural workers’ actual roles and practices on Patreon. While the “fundraiser” designation is also somewhat problematic and does not end the discussion, it does serve as a more concrete description of the actual work involved in the neo-patronage relation. In other words, Patreon users do not use the platform to perform their creative work, but rather to *fundraise*: they engage in practices, tactics and comportments intended to persuade their audience to become patrons and send them money.

From a Marxist perspective, Patreon fundraisers can also be classified as what Van Doorn (2017) calls “platform labor”—a categorization which confirms their status as specifically laboring subjects confronting capital through the platform relation. According to van Doorn, the emergence of platform labor is a result of neoliberal policies stretching back decades, as well as from legal and technological developments which

emphasized and reinforced more casual employment categories in Western economies. The 2008 financial crisis worsened this trend, giving rise to a wave of precarious, platform-mediated ‘gig’ work which “optimizes” the economic exploitation of casual workers desperate to supplement their income (Van Doorn 2017:904).

Many ‘gig’ workers therefore engage platform companies from a position of weakness; they are often compelled to accept stringent terms and conditions—e.g. to carry all the responsibility involved in providing a service of some sort, with no benefits—in order to access irregular and unpredictable pay. According to Van Doorn, lean platform companies reinforce this power dynamic by maintaining what he calls a “temporary staffing industry...augmented by a more austere and zero-liability peer-to-peer model” (Van Doorn 2017:901).<sup>62</sup> Platform workers’ highly individuated and weakened positioning vis-a-vis the platform company (as well as in neoliberal society more broadly) then enables their systematic economic exploitation by the capitalist class. Consequently, they are converted “into a captive revenue stream that secures shareholder value while rendering workers largely invisible to customers, to each other, and even to themselves” (Van Doorn 2017:904). While this is not the case with all forms of platform labor—for example, Patreon fundraisers are strongly encouraged to make themselves as visible and connected as possible to their patrons—it is a common feature of platform-mediated service and task work—e.g. home cleaning (Tidy), home food delivery (Uber Eats, Deliveroo) and ride services (Uber, Lyft)—where hired individuals might be

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<sup>62</sup> This view is echoed by Cole, who describes how these platforms “essentially extend the low-tech model of temp-agencies or informal networks of day-labourers into really subsumed and digitally-mediated service sectors. They offer a private technological ‘fix’ to labour market precarity, taking advantage of job polarisation and the displacement of individuals into the relative surplus population” (Cole 2017)

expected to quickly perform some kind of job or chore, and then more or less disappear (Marvit 2014). In these instances, the company affords consumers a means to “conceal,” distance and anonymize human labor behind the platform interface (Atanasoski and Vora 2015: 20). From the perspective of the platform company, the transaction itself is always the priority; the general seamlessness, formality and convenience of the transaction then further obscures the underlying class relation.

The structural invisibility of platform labor also is reinforced by their oft-designated status as independent contractors. Many platform companies operating in the so-called “gig economy” benefit from placing the burden, cost and risk of production on their producers (e.g. drivers, deliverers, taskers) who are specifically classified as independent contractors (as opposed to employees) (Vigo 2018; Bajwa et al 2018; Kessler 2014). This is often stated in the platform company’s terms of service (TOS), wherein:

...the platform and the contractor are stipulated to be in a commercial relationship where the former provides a service to the latter in the form of a software-generated market lead to a potential client for the service offered by the contractor – a service that is categorically distinguished from the one provided by the platform. (Van Doorn 2017:902)

According to this logic, platform companies do not technically employ the labor using their platform; rather, they are something more akin to service providers or brokers who “intermediate” transactions between external, independent contractors and their client-consumers. One prominent example is Uber, who have about 4 million drivers working through their platform, yet do not identify any of them as actual employees. Specifically, Uber considers itself to be a “matchmaking” company for service providers and

consumers; as such, they never use the term “drivers.” In one notable legal deposition, the company’s attorneys went to great length to deny that their drivers were even “drivers” at all, preferring instead to repeatedly and unswervingly label them as “independent, third-party transportation providers” (Bensinger 2019). While this distinction would appear semantic, it legally reinforces the independent contractor status for Uber drivers, thereby exempting the company from fulfilling any requirements which the status of ‘employee’ would command.

In one recent case, the U.S. National Labor Relations board (NLRB) issued an opinion which further codified Uber drivers’ independent contractor status (Hawkins 2019). The decision was based on the NLRB-established principle of “entrepreneurial opportunity,” which dictates that “workers who have significant control over their profits and losses are likely independent contractors” (Pasternak 2019). They therefore do not receive the same rights as employees (e.g. to engage in collective bargaining or form a union, receive medical leave, expense reimbursement, or overtime pay) (Malos et al 2018; Bensinger 2015). In the case of Uber specifically, the decision cites such factors as a driver’s freedom to leave and work for a competitor, as well as control their working hours, place of work and own and operate their vehicles. However, this decision applies only to cases which are reviewed by the NLRB; consequently, other laws at the state and federal level may apply different standards regarding the status of ‘gig’ workers.

In California for example, the state legislature recently passed a bill that requires “app-based companies” to “treat contract workers as employees”—or more specifically, that “workers must be designated as employees instead of contractors if a company exerts control over how they perform their tasks or if their work is part of a company’s regular

business” (Conger and Scheiber 2019). While this law indicates that the employment status of platform workers in California may soon change, what is at stake for platform companies more broadly is the very economic model which makes their business profitable. These decisions therefore reflect the ongoing, uneven interpretation of the employment status of ‘gig’ workers across varying state and national levels—laws which platform companies are also contesting and seeking to shape in their favor (Rodd 2020)

The “independent contractor” designation of platform workers is central to the platform accumulation model; it is the status which legally absolves platform companies from any of the burdens or responsibilities required of an employer. Accordingly, these workers are positioned as autonomous individuals outside of the company. The only concern of the platform is that they successfully interact and transact with client-consumers—and most importantly, that all transactions occur through the platform. For many platform companies, these transactions amount to hundreds of thousands of micro-financial payments per month. In exchange for processing these transactions, most platform companies charge fees which can be considered a form of *rent*.

### **The “Lean” Platform Company as Rentier**

In contrast to most traditional business models, rent-seeking platform companies are not concerned with overseeing and controlling the labor process of employed producers, nor with producing and exchanging commodities; they are concerned with extracting rent from the platform-mediated interactions and transactions of platform users. In the case of Patreon, rent-seeking is the company’s primary means of generating



revenue. The company sustains this model by occupying a quasi-monopoly position in the neo-patronage crowdfunding market, where they not only own and control the means of access, but the means to monetize that access.<sup>63</sup> The “means” of access are comprised of the digital tools and infrastructure (e.g. algorithms, data, servers, support staff, payment processing etc.) which make up the platform as a product. The product is then rented out to fundraisers in the form of access to the platform’s neo-patronage funding apparatus (or in the case of other lean platforms, access to what may be a service, experience or asset of some kind).

To its critics, rent-seeking is considered an unproductive and even “parasitic” practice; “it diverts resources from productive uses that create wealth, to mere wealth extraction...the money is merely siphoned off to the unproductive rentier” (Sayer 2015: 53). According to Rachel O’Dwyer, rent “constitutes a credit title or control of some immaterial or material asset that grants the right to draw benefit from a position that operates outside of production. It is unearned income” (O’Dwyer 234). This echoes the views of classical economists like Adam Smith, who declared that the “rent of land and the profits of stock are everywhere...the principal sources from which unproductive hands derive their subsistence” (Smith 2009: ch. 3). For Marx, such rentier income would also be considered unproductive, as it represents a transfer of *existing* wealth rather than the creation of new wealth; “[c]onsequently, only that labour-power is productive which

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<sup>63</sup> However, Patreon recently introduced a number of supplemental services which may in turn diversify the company’s revenue-generating capacities. This is evident in a new tier-based system the company introduced, whereby higher-earning fundraisers (those receiving USD\$1000 per month or more) can pay additional monthly fees in return for receiving specialized services from Patreon (e.g. having a personal “team” provide them with marketing advice and/or merchandise fulfillment in the course of creating their own “membership business”) (Peckham: 2019). If these types of value-added services begin to take hold, they may introduce a more ‘hands-on,’ managerial-type role for the platform (in addition to its basic role as a mediator of exchanges).

produces a value greater than its own” (Marx 1969: 152). In other words, Patreon and other lean platform companies which rely almost entirely upon rent for revenue (as opposed to realizing surplus value *directly* from the productive activity of platform producers) produce no new value; they are “merely re-distributing value (and surplus value) that has already been created in the process of commodity production” *prior* to the platform relation (Booth 2015).<sup>64</sup>

Rent-seeking platform companies are becoming ubiquitous. They mediate the socio-economic activity of tens of millions of people in sectors as varied as crowdfunding (Kickstarter), lodging (Airbnb) and online payment processing (Paypal). According to O’Dwyer (2015), these platforms gain a “direct rent” from mediating producer-consumer transactions—or in Patreon’s case, financial transactions between fundraisers and patrons. This is a type of rent derived from the platform’s ability to control “access to an element of production; such as when an operator establishes a monopoly on infrastructure, bandwidth, software or platforms” (O’Dwyer 2015:234). In the case of Airbnb, this would be control over the platform which provides access to lodging for travelers as well as income for property owners. On Patreon, it is control over the platform which provides access to income for fundraisers and the technical means for fans to become patrons. This is in contrast to “indirect rent,” or rent gained “when actors trade, not on the resource itself, but on the commodities and services that may be expropriated through its use, such as from advertising revenues” (O’Dwyer 2015:234).

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<sup>64</sup> In other words, “they “facilitate the collection of interest payments, rents or profits through unequal exchange (merchant’s capital). This form of exploitation appropriates surplus labour performed elsewhere and in doing so, merely redistributes a portion of the total surplus value of society.” (Cole 2017)

This would be the case for advertising-based platforms like Facebook, who employ both the rent-seeking and surplus-value generating models. Specifically, Facebook earns an unproductive rent from charging access fees to advertising companies (in order to access platform users' attention) as well as individuals (who might pay to promote an event). However, they also generate surplus value from the productive work of their employees, as for example, when they are employed to process and analyze data generated by Facebook's users (which is then sold as a commodity to a third party).<sup>65</sup>

The traditional, late-20<sup>th</sup> century record company-structure provides a contrast to the rentier platform model. As the primary corporate mediator for recording artists, the record company was capable of investing large sums of capital into 'making a market' for its products: namely, the recorded works of the artists contracted to the label. As a regime driven principally by the mass production of individual commodities (in the form of recording units), record companies were needed to market and promote their artists, as well as invest in their (sometimes) long-term development. By pushing commodities onto a very fickle and notoriously fashion and trend-driven market, the hope was that at least a few artists would "break" and provide them with substantial profits for many years. Consequently, a great deal of capital and resources were invested in promotion and marketing with the goal of manufacturing audience 'buzz' around specific recording artists, whose valorization and legitimation in the eyes of consumers was critical to their

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<sup>65</sup> In this instance, Facebook generates revenue—not only as a "rent" via selling advertising space (Rigi and Prey 2015; Caraway 2011)—but also from the surplus value realized from their "employees whose labor power is exploited to produce the information that is sold" (e.g. when Facebook employees are tasked with processing and packaging user data for resale as a commodity) (Comor 2015 18). As such, a person who posts content on Facebook (and "produces" a trail of data activity) is not engaged in a *direct production relation* with the platform. They are commenting and sharing as a leisure activity which can be regarded as general, "concrete" production. Consequently, harvesting user data does not *in and of itself* produce surplus value.

(potential) longevity. Late-20<sup>th</sup> century record labels invested heavily in radio play, merchandising, store displays and other promotional techniques, all in effort to “find some way to enter the cognitive paths of consumers” and spark sustained interest in their artists (Denisoff 1975:189).<sup>66</sup> These companies were large, capital-intensive entities with thousands of employees, which evolved to oversee all aspects of developing, producing, marketing and distributing the work of contracted artists with the chief goal of selling commodities. In contrast, the rentier platform company oversees and mediates very little aside from the exchanges of producers and consumers with the primary goal of extracting rent.

Patreon also subscribes to a lean organizational approach: rather than “pushing” customers towards buying products or services, it provides its external fundraisers the means by which to “pull” patrons onto the platform themselves. Patreon retains no internal productive labor force and produces no goods for surplus value extraction. It takes a mostly hands-off approach, letting its users take the lead in developing the neo-patronage relation with their audience (more on this in the next section). This is the business logic of the rentier corporation, one which “emphasize[s] ecosystem governance more than product optimization, and persuasion of outside partners more than control of internal employees” (Parker et al 2016: ch. 1). This is especially the case with lean crowdfunding platforms like Patreon, who focus nearly all their energies on growth, which means getting more fundraisers to join up in order to continually enlarge the

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<sup>66</sup> Terrestrial radio stations in particular represented key mediators for promoting and marketing physical music commodities in circulation. Radio stations were the primary gatekeepers, or “institutional regulators” whom record companies worked through in order to access mass audiences of music consumers (Hirsch 1990 136). While they still exist, the centrality of their role has diminished with the emergence of online platform companies which both market *and* distribute digital music commodities (e.g. Spotify, Youtube, Pandora, Itunes, Bandcamp).

platform's network of accumulation. The patron-fundraiser relation is then foregrounded, while the platform presents itself as something like a neutral partner, collecting fees for a service. However, far from being simple "matchmakers," rent-seeking platforms like Patreon are very much political-economic entities with concrete, profit-seeking interests that are built into the platform's business architecture and operations.

### **3.3 The Patreon Platform**

#### **Patreon and the Neo-Patronage Crowdfunding Model**

The Patreon company was founded in 2013 by multi-instrumentalist and independent recording artist Jack Conte, who conceived of the neo-patronage relation as a means to supplement the declining income he was receiving as a YouTube video producer. For several years, Conte—along with his partner Nataly Dawn—made a living from producing "video-songs" and uploading them to YouTube. The popularity of these songs resulted in millions of views on the platform, which led to a significant amount of YouTube advertising income and digital download sales (approximately 100,000 in 2009 alone), as well as song licensing deals with companies like Toyota and Hyundai (Wiles 2011). However, by 2012, YouTube was experiencing a "glut of inventory" from ever more users uploading ever more videos, which significantly reduced the available advertising revenue for producers. YouTube then turned to heavily discounted "bulk" advertising sales, which ultimately paid very little to anyone except the platform's most popular users (Kaufman 2014; Kafka 2013; Baron 2013). Bulk advertising on platforms like YouTube work by offering advertisers significant discounts when they purchase ads

in large quantities for display across the entire platform. The discounted fee charged per 1000 ‘impressions’ or ‘views’ was then passed along to YouTube content producers in the form of lower pay rates, placing more pressure on them to boost view counts in order to make up for the losses. After YouTube’s own 45% cut and increasing production costs (in order to stay competitive within a crowded field of other YouTubers), producers like Conte were left with very little income, and the model became untenable. As one disgruntled YouTube producer noted in 2013, “YouTube is an awesome place to build a brand, but it is [now] a horrible place to build a business” (Kaufman 2014).

At the same time, music streaming platforms like Spotify were emerging as the preferred media of music consumption. According to Conte, “[t]he business models were changing all the time, so our (USD)\$58,000 of annual iTunes download income was about to be replaced by about (USD)\$6000 of streaming income...[T]he whole machine in 2013 that took art online and outputted money was totally nonfunctional” (Conte 2017). In other words, with the emergence of streaming platforms like Spotify, there was less consumer interest in purchasing digital MP3 downloads, diminishing what was once a primary source of revenue for independent recording artists (Goddard 2012). The idea for the Patreon platform was born from this capitalist quandary: the systemic pressures of a digital music economy which fragments revenue into multiple and often miniscule streams provided a compelling reason for Conte to push forward in finding an alternative in the form an online patronage platform.

Six years after its founding, Patreon is now the largest patronage-based crowdfunding platform company; it is valued at USD\$450 million, with recurring revenue of more than USD\$50 million in 2019 (Peckham 2019). As a private technology

company, Patreon sets the terms and conditions according to which its users might access the market for patrons and income. Dozens of categories of creative work are currently funded through the Patreon model—from podcasters, to YouTubers, to cartoonists, to musicians to burlesque dancers. As of 2019, Patreon transferred roughly USD\$500 million in payments from 3 million patrons to 135,000 active users (Constine 2019). However, the vast majority of the monthly income received through Patreon notably goes to a tiny percentage of these users—about 4300—whom Patreon categorizes as “mid-tail” earners (or those who receive on average about USD\$1,000 per month) and who in turn generate the majority of the income which is processed through the platform (amounting to “70 percent of Patreon’s revenue (or ~USD\$35 million in 2019)”) (Peckham 2019).<sup>67</sup>

Patreon grew from an initial base of three “creators”—Conte, Dawn and their roommate—to thousands in a matter of months. Patreon relied entirely on these new users to persuade and convince their own audiences to become patrons, enabling them to overcome the most difficult part of scaling a platform company: the problem of attracting enough platform labor to one side, so that it becomes both useful and desirable enough to draw consumers to the other side. Conte succeeded in this by converting his existing YouTube channel audience into the initial wave of patrons joining the platform, establishing first-mover advantage in the nascent sector of patron-financed cultural production.<sup>68</sup> His success then inspired a wave of similarly disillusioned YouTube

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<sup>67</sup> “Mid-tail” earners are central to Patreon’s business model. They tend to be more durable and reliable customers who have pre-existing audiences built over time and are therefore less prone to drastic fluctuations in their patron base. To the company they represent the ideal type of “creator”; one well-suited—not only for ongoing rent-extraction—but also for Patreon’s “premium” value-added services, e.g. the support features, services and tools which Patreon offers at higher payment tiers (Peckham 2019).

<sup>68</sup> Within a day of launching Patreon, Conte acquired 266 patrons who offered a combined total of USD\$1599.00 for each video he might create (Conte 2013). Within three months, Patreon had

producers to also join his endeavor, who then convinced their own audiences to transition to Patreon. Patreon created a market in the emerging platform economy; at the time, there were no other platforms designed to match creative producers with ongoing, patronage-based income and/or capital from their audience. On one hand, Patreon succeeded because it targeted a historically specific group in a niche sector of cultural production—disgruntled YouTube producers—who already had audiences and were actively seeking new revenue streams. On the other, Patreon appeared to offer a platform-based “solution” to the enduring problem of artist compensation; one which aligned well with then-prevailing narratives of entrepreneurship and crowdfunding success.<sup>69</sup>

Patreon’s ongoing crowdfunding model is based on the pre-modern patronage system of financing cultural production. Traditionally, patronage is an exchange relation between an individual and a sponsor. As a social institution, patronage systems emerged during the late Middle Ages as a means for musicians, sculptors, poets, painters, and other such artisans to attain financial support from wealthy benefactors (primarily, the church, royal courts and noble families). Within these early patronage systems, “the artist was typically retained or commissioned as an individual professional worker,” and provided with a livelihood (and sometimes as a member of a household) in return for providing the patron with artistic services (Williams 1981:39). Notably, the “defining characteristic of all patronal social relations is the privileged situation of the patron”; in other words, the artist always remained in a dependent relation with their financial

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acquired roughly 2300 creators—many of who were also YouTube ‘content producers’ attracted to the platform’s revenue-boosting capacities (Gannes 2013).

<sup>69</sup> As demonstrated most clearly by the (then) widely-reported crowdfunding success of musician and artist Amanda Palmer, whose 2012 Kickstarter campaign brought in over USD\$1 million (Powers 2015; Palmer 2014; Lindvall 2012).



benefactor, who could “give or withhold his commission or support” at any time.

However, with the emergence of industrial capitalism the patronage relation evolved into new forms. In particular, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century composers began to use the subscription-list, or “sponsorship” patronage model, which freed them from dependency on a single sponsor (Williams 1981:42). Swords identifies this model as a “nascent form of crowd-patronage,” one which “was common in the literary arts where authors, their agents and/or publishers would nurture networks of patrons to subscribe to their output and provide a guaranteed revenue stream” (Swords 2017:67).

In her examination of the late-18th and early-19th century Viennese music production, DeNora (1991) notes how changes in taste and distinction among the city’s aristocrats led to the decline of institutional forms of patronage. Until this point, the social status of the Viennese aristocracy was expressed through their ability to control and cultivate musical affairs through the direct patronage of musicians and composers. DeNora explains how this system (and the status relations it supported) began to fracture when a growing middle class of “new” aristocrats—e.g. “wholesale merchants, bankers, and higher government bureaucrats”—entered the scene, who also had a demand for musical performances (Denora 1991: 335). In this context, both established and new aristocrats “shared” in the “patronage rights over musicians” and broadened their options for economic support. Accordingly, the “practice of giving formal private concerts in the home began to trickle down the social scale, with the lower nobility and the wealthy middle class assuming an increasingly active role” (Denora 1991: 338). As a result, these “new “free-lance” musicians...now had an economic interest in widening their circles of admirers and in furthering their reputations,” instilling in them an “incipient bias toward

professional autonomy" (Denora 1991: 340). Subsequently, in the transition away from from the single-sponsor patronage model, "employment opportunities for musicians were far less regular, which meant a particular hardship" (Denora 1991: 344). This also highlights how the status of newly "emancipated musicians" ("free" from the bonds of *direct* patronage) first came to experience the precariousness of professional musicianship (which later appears as a defining characteristic under 20th century production regimes) (Denora 1991: 344).

In the networked economy of online platforms, patronage reemerges as a form of "crowd patronage" (Swords 2017). However, this is distinct from earlier forms in that it appears to shift "control over what and how work is produced from patrons to artists" (Swords 2017: 62).<sup>70</sup> In other words, the artist no longer needs to cater to the interests and whims of a single benefactor; in turn, this opens up the patronage relation, enlarging the base of available funders from a single patron to potentially thousands (Swords 2017: 63). However, despite the seeming liberation provided by the dethroning of the sole sponsor, the power dynamic does not disappear. The platform company which constitutes the market for this type of crowdfunding (as for example, Patreon does) sets the terms

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<sup>70</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno note that the pre-capitalist patronage model provided artists with a "degree of independence from market mechanisms" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 105). However, they also identify how even under patronage, it remained an exchange relation (as works of art were still produced in return for a livelihood). In their view, even "[p]ure works of art, which negated the commodity character of society by simply following their own inherent laws, were at the same time always commodities. To the extent that, up to the eighteenth century, artists were protected from the market by patronage, they were subject to the patrons and their purposes instead" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 127). However, not all exchange relations are equal; in other words, while an artist may still be beholden to a patron to produce works of art in exchange for a livelihood, that exchange relation is not the same as producing commercial works of art for mass consumption. Therefore, under capitalism—and in this case, platform capitalism—while the funding and creation of art in a neo-patronage relation is often conditioned and/or impacted by exchange-driven imperatives, they may not be subjectively interpreted as alienating or economically exploitive as those undertaken in purely commercial endeavors governed by a wage-relation. This theme will be explored more in the next chapter.

and conditions of the neo-patronage relation in accordance with the accumulation imperatives of capital, while the cost and risk of production and marketing (as well as maintaining a livelihood) is completely carried by individual fundraisers. Platform companies therefore exert control over producers precisely by ‘setting them free.’ This might seem contradictory, but as the autonomous fundraiser comes to depend on platform-derived income, platform companies still hold a controlling position by dictating the terms, conditions and limits of access. This recalls Marx’s interpretation of freedom “in the double sense,” whereby the individual worker is “free” to “dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity,” yet “on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale...he is free of all the objects needed for the realization of his labour-power” (Marx 1982: 272-73). As autonomous individuals, platform labor are similarly “free” to sell their labor power in the capitalist marketplace, yet also remain “free” in that they are “unencumbered by any means of production of their own.” (Marx 1982:874)

In the case of Patreon, its users are presumably free to “directly” receive funding from patrons (subject to Patreon’s appropriation of a percentage). However, they must first submit to Patreon’s rules and regulations in order to access the technology, services and infrastructure needed to maintain the neo-patronage relation, access patrons and receive payments. Aspiring Patreon fundraisers can then choose the degree to which they commit themselves to the relation; it is not required for them to do anything more than simply sign up to Patreon and hope patrons might suddenly appear and send them money. However, as evidenced by *Ne Obliviscaris*, there are those fundraisers who use the platform hoping to attract as many patrons and as much money as possible—a motivation which effectively serves the rent-seeking interests of Patreon. Recognizing this, the

company employs techniques designed to elicit and impel users towards more entrepreneurial practices and subject positionings in order to attract and sustain those patrons (section IV below will focus on this specifically).<sup>71</sup> Consequently, Patreon does not need to coerce them into producing anything (via contract or other forms of legal pressure); the neo-patronage relation represents an independent, individual endeavor that appears to self-evidently reward those users who work hard to cultivate, serve and expand their patron-base.

Considering the example of Ne Obliviscaris, they (as well as other recording artists) often confront the need to interact with a variety of online platforms in all aspects of their career in order to economically survive. According to Klein et al, “(non-music) corporations are becoming increasingly difficult to avoid if a musician is to distribute and promote his or her music through the increasingly standard online and offline channels” (Klein et al 2017:12). As artists negotiate and sustain their professional relationship with their audience, they find it practical to connect with them via Facebook or Instagram, distribute their music via Soundcloud, YouTube, Distrokid and/or Bandcamp and promote their performances via BandsInTown or Songkick, among dozens of other online platforms which have become indispensable for maintaining an occupation as a recording artist in the digital music economy. In particular, the streaming platforms which arose in the late 2000s established the platform-mediated model as the future of music distribution. Through companies like Spotify, vast catalogs of music became ubiquitous

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<sup>71</sup> This is an example of how “[c]onsumption likewise produces the producers *inclination* by beckoning to him as an aim-determining need” (Marx 1973:92). In this case, the platform relation not only facilitates productive activity, but *mediates* it as well, and according to definite class interests. Accordingly, when producers are tasked to “market and adjust themselves” in the platform relation, they are effectively ‘producing themselves’ in response to the demands of a specific producer-consumer relation.

and cheap to access. Jeremy Morris (2015) argues that these platforms effectively “formatted culture” into new digital-music commodity arrangements. Subsequently, such platforms have developed into portals which mediate recording artist-audience interactions across all manner of social and economic activity, representing the “enclosure of music into a wider assemblage of interdependent technologies” (Morris 2015:163).

Artists like Ne Obliviscaris are therefore “free” to create music, perform live and make money however they can. However, a great deal of their productive activity, in the end, is funneled into a portfolio of platform-mediated relations. In this dynamic, services are accessed by accepting the terms of the platform company and adjusting one’s habits and practices to those terms. For example, artists are now expected to establish a social media presence in the course of building and retaining an audience. Through platforms like Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, they actively engage their “followers” with comments, interactions and communications in order to maintain “hype,” as well as promote their live performances, merchandise and affiliated brands. The number of followers, “mentions” and “views” an artist attains then serve as quantitative metrics of their popularity and their “brand” as an artist (alongside other important indicators, e.g. the number of song streams on Spotify) (Meier 2017:78).<sup>72</sup> In many cases, “musicians who understood their careers solely as artists are now expected to interact online and understand how their interactions best generate brand equity as they analyze refined sets of information about their fans” (Anderson 2014: 179-180). This reflects the power of

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<sup>72</sup> According to Klein et al: “Understanding the central aspect of a music-maker as his or her “brand” does much to normalize and legitimate a wider business and promotional environment where musicians court or are courted by corporate brands and sponsors” (Klein et al 2017: 229-30).

platform companies to not only make markets, but control them as well. “Capital is above all a power to command and prescribe,” and its administration in platform capitalism is no different (Lazzarato 2012: 73). The structural power of these platform companies is then demonstrated in two ways: first, by enclosing upon these sectors of cultural production and establishing conditions which make it requisite for creative workers (e.g. recording artists) to engage in platform-mediated relations in the course of their work; and second, by setting the terms and conditions of platform engagement in alignment with the accumulation imperatives of capital.

As more platform companies emerge and more activities are platformized, conventional interpretations of autonomy in the culture industries are called into question. For example, in the neo-patronage relation, the more autonomous the creative worker, the more resourceful they are for capital; the free, individual fundraiser does nearly all the work, while Patreon need only skim rent. At the same time, they become dependent on the company’s capacities and affordances (e.g. the tools and infrastructure which allow them to interact and receive income from patrons). Platform labor then carries a “self-provisioning” burden which benefits the accumulation interests of the platform company. In other words, when workers “self-provide” their own labor and materials in the course of engaging the platform relation (as well as their own costs of reproduction outside of it), they are effectively augmenting the profits of the platform company (Perelman 2000).<sup>73</sup> Consequently—and despite their apparent liberation from conventional

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<sup>73</sup> During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, primitive accumulation strategies and tactics instituted a similarly dependent relation. Specifically, land-working peasants were legally and politically divested from the means and resources necessary for an independent livelihood, driving them towards a reliance on wage labor. However, capitalists realized that rendering labor *totally dependent* on wage income was not ideal for maximizing profits, as it tended to raise the subsistence level-wage required for labor to support and reproduce itself. This problem was solved by permitting workers a degree of “self-

institutions and power structures—the “autonomy” platform labor attains in this relation has no intrinsic emancipatory *political* value or meaning; it is a form of autonomy predicated on occupational individuation and isolation, rather than any substantial freedom from the obligations and constraints of capital accumulation.

Platform labor are therefore “autonomous” mainly in the sense they are “free” to find work wherever they can and according to their own schedules, abilities and interests. Ultimately, the platform company holds the power of exclusion: “autonomous” platform users have no right or claim to the platform company’s services and affordances, or a ‘right to a living’ for that matter—they either tolerate the established conditions, or seek employment and income from other means. As discrete service providers, platform labor therefore confront the platform company from a subordinate, dependent positioning. For some, the outcome is a distinctly entrepreneurial mode of autonomy, one which firmly links and embeds artists and creative workers to the capital relation in ongoing and contradictory ways.

### **Control and Autonomy**

We’re proud and motivated that creators rely on us for their paycheck, and ultimately, their creative freedom. We take that responsibility seriously, and have fun fulfilling that mission together. – Patreon Mission Statement

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provisioning” (through “household labor”—e.g. home gardening and livestock-tending) which then allowed capitalists to drive wages below subsistence level (thereby increasing relative surplus value) (Perelman 2000: 103-04). In doing so, “[t]hey wanted to make sure that workers would be able to be self-sufficient enough to raise the rate of surplus value without making them so independent that they would or could resist wage labor” (Perelman 2000: 107). What then amounted to partial self-provisioning kept workers tethered to the wage relation in order to compensate for what they could not totally produce for themselves.

Patreon presents the neo-patronage relation as a novel, direct and meritocratic means for remunerating artists and creative workers. It appears to reward the most talented and deserving among them by letting audiences and fans decide to whom patronage should be extended, lending the model a degree of validity and heft. Moreover, Patreon appears to reduce the complexities of culture industries finance down to a direct, democratic and quantifiable platform-mediated relationship. It places what are often the behind-the-scenes economics of funding cultural production at the forefront of the producer-consumer relation, establishing a seemingly rational correlation between talent and income.

Patreon fundraisers are apparently free to engage fans “directly” and to benefit from a financial relation which does not interfere with their creative autonomy, nor imposes any requirements or standards regarding the aesthetic qualities of their work. Moreover, the corporation does not appear to dominate the relations between the creative worker and their audience; consequently there is no overt tension between Patreon (as the corporate mediator) and the productive independence of platform users. Unlike both the pre-modern patronage relation and the 20<sup>th</sup> century record label relation, the patron-financer does not appear to interfere with, shape, or control their creative process, or seek a return on an investment in contracted artists; rather, they support the artist financially so that they continue to produce the goods they enjoy.<sup>74</sup> In short, patrons do not seem to possess a singular will to bend artists to the demands of capital accumulation.

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<sup>74</sup> Additionally, Dowthwaite (2018) identifies several motivating factors which drive patronage on Patreon, including the desire to connect more directly with the artist whose work they enjoy, the promise of some kind of access to a community of likeminded fans, and the desire to access exclusive content (Dowthwaite 2018).



Behind these appearances however, there are power relations stemming from Patreon's economic interests as a platform company which condition and shape the occupational conduct of its users, and which stand in contrast to those conventionally linking corporations and creative workers in the culture industries. In the neo-patronage relation, the fundraiser is presented as a creatively and economically autonomous subject; yet in practical terms, these users require Patreon's mediating capacities in order to realize that autonomy—and more importantly, income. In other words, Patreon users are still subject to the imperatives of capital accumulation, yet those imperatives do not appear to emanate from the “neutral” platform. Rather, the legal status of these creative workers as independent contractors introduces pressures and expectations of individual conduct which are further reinforced in the terms and conditions of platform use. Consequently, they remain individuated, productive inputs in the wider apparatus of platform capitalism, despite attaining more occupational freedom within its relations of production—a de-socialized status which renders them more vulnerable and pliable subjects for capital accumulation.

Platform companies like Patreon therefore regulate labor by freeing it from the relations of immediate domination characteristic of direct contractual employment. This evokes Deleuze's (1992) concept of “control society,” which describes labor's post-Fordist liberation from the confines of institutional-based, disciplinary power structures (e.g. the factory, the office, the record label). For example, the conventional Fordist factory acted not only as an apparatus of production, but also of discipline; workers were positioned within restricted, clearly-surveilled spaces and regulated through established norms of reward and punishment. For recording artists working in the 20<sup>th</sup> century music

industries, this disciplinary relation was demonstrated through the constraints of their recording contract, which outlined clear expectations of productivity (a certain number of albums over a certain frame of time), the terms of reward (royalty percentages) and punishment (legal consequences for non-fulfillment). In contrast, post-Fordist neoliberal-conditioned work formations release working subjects from the confines of these conventional institutions, isolating and individuating them within more casual, flexible and decentralized relations of production. Labor is then indirectly controlled by instituting conditions which necessitate their self-adaption and self-responsibilization to the imperatives of this new occupational dynamic—a subjective positioning which is then legally confirmed by their designation as independent contractors.

This ‘control through liberation’ dynamic is clearly demonstrated in platform capitalism, where platform companies do not exert power *over* confined working subjects, but rather *through* them as self-invested, self-regulating independent contractors. As “micro-entrepreneurs” they are encouraged to “be their own boss”; they retain the freedom to opt in—or out—of as many jobs or ‘gigs’ as they desire (Booth 2015). In this relation, platform companies employ what Alex Williams describes as “a modulatory mode of power”:

...one which relies simultaneously on both constraint and enablement, a tightly woven braid of necessity and contingency. By sculpting the actions and entities conducted within, platforms act as a kind of possibility space or fitness landscape, setting the conditions for autonomous self-organisation. (Williams 2015:226)

More specifically, they are permitted to “modulate” their relations with capital—but only ever on capital’s terms and conditions (which can be accepted or rejected, but not without consequences) (Deleuze 1992:4). In other words, platform companies are also political

apparatuses which prescribe and outline practices and modes of conduct for their users. They “make certain actions easier than others (while rendering others impossible)” in the course of shaping user activity in ways conducive to the accumulation interests of capital (Williams 2015:226).

This notion of the platform as a “possibility space” which sets “conditions for autonomous self-organisation” recalls Steven Lukes (2005) “three dimensional” view of power. According to Lukes, analyses of power should not be limited to “actual and observable conflict” —e.g. the overt and covert statements, decisions and actions of individuals, institutions and organizations (Lukes 2005: 23). Rather, a ‘three-dimensional view’ would also consider the structural capacities of power to not only shape and direct, but to exclude; specifically, it is the power of collective formations to omit, and/or sideline sources of conflict altogether (as for example, the conflicts inherent to the conventional employment relation). It is the power of “collective forces and social arrangements” to designate what is (and is not) possible by “controlling the agenda”—a dynamic of power which is not necessarily evident and/or perceptible in normative frameworks of analysis (Lukes 2005 26-27). From this perspective, the political power of platform companies is demonstrated through their capacity to naturalize and validate the occupational relations of platform-mediated work; they establish what ultimately become the standards, norms and practices to which independent contractors can voluntarily subscribe, or not.

As *self*-disciplined individual subjects, platform labor then insert themselves into a platform workspace where “liberating and enslaving forces confront one another” (and which will register no problems if they fail to thrive or even show up) (Deleuze 1992:4).

On one hand, they embrace occupational practices and habits perceived as conducive to earning an independent living, free from the restraints and burdens of the conventional employment relation. The liberation and autonomy of the platform relation appears self-evident: it rewards (and profits from) those who are able to take advantage of its affordances. On the other hand, those practices and habits conform the individual to a production relation which is primarily sustained by the incessant modulation of the self to the requirements and imperatives of the platform company. For platform labor, the flipside of greater autonomy is greater social and economic isolation, as the institutional apparatus, legal protections and solidarity which supported labor under disciplinary production regimes gives way to the weakened, fragmented, independent contractor-status which is so often a defining feature of the platform-mediated work.

In control society production regimes, there are no necessary temporal or spatial boundaries to the capital relation. Producers and consumers encounter 24-hour digitally-surveilled networks of accumulation, unremittingly governed by a wide range of corporate, legal and regulatory frameworks. Platform companies instantiate a “property regime” driven by a logic of enclosure, expropriation and accumulation (Lazzarato 2015: 43). Patreon demonstrates this logic by instituting a rent-seeking model which “administers” control by externalizing and outsourcing platform labor into autonomous, self-regulating units (any number of whom can fail individually without endangering the integrity of the apparatus itself). In practical terms, Patreon’s opportunities are best-suited to independent, entrepreneurial subjects, or those willing to internalize and adopt the logic of the neo-patronage model. As each fundraiser joins this relation, they encounter a system of platform governance which “opposes individuals against one another and runs

through each, dividing each within” (Delueze 1992: 5). In other words, the drive to compete in an occupational model which appears founded on a meritocratic race to secure patrons and income, impels users to divide their identity into both entrepreneurial and creative modes of subjectivity. This is the “political project of transforming each individual into an “individual enterprise”” and one which undergirds the elicitation of entrepreneurial subjects in the context of the neo-patronage relation (Lazzarato 2015: 107).

On one hand, Patreon’s near-monopoly standing in the neo-patronage crowdfunding sector gives it great leeway in establishing the *formal* ‘terms of use’ on which its users might gain access to the market for patrons and therefore money. Patreon determines the extent to which technical requirements and quantitative pressures might be employed, giving them the ability to “prescribe and restrict” what is and is not possible on the platform. Like many platform companies, Patreon is the final arbiter, retaining “exclusive control over the surface on which the exchange takes place” (Schwarz 2017: 381). The company establishes rules outlining when and how patrons are charged and fundraisers are paid, the type of content which is/is not allowed (e.g. no “pornographic material or sexual services”) as well as what media formats and third-party applications are permitted.

On the other hand, Patreon also institutes *informal* terms of use through its self-produced instructional media, much of which takes the form of ‘best practices’ advice columns as well as interviews with established fundraisers. These “advice” media are disseminated on the company’s in-house educational arm called “Patreon University” as well as on the official “Patreon Blog.” As instructional discourse, they accentuate and

reinforce ideal types of user comportment, practices and conduct best-suited for Patreon success, often by attaching the neo-patronage relation to narratives of occupational autonomy and individual self-empowerment. Taken together, these formal and informal terms outline the modalities and possibilities of platform interaction as well as elicit, animate and reinforce standards of productive platform conduct. Each will be assessed separately in the following sections.

### **Terms of Use**

Patreon's 'Terms of Use' are the formal expression of the company's political power. They legally confirm the subordinate status of platform users and lay the foundation for what Van Dijck (2013) calls the "governing protocols" that subsequently shape and moderate user conduct and practices on the platform. In the context of Patreon, these protocols "provide a set of instructions that users are forced to obey if they want to partake in the mediated flow of interaction...they impose a hegemonic logic onto a mediated social practice" (Van Dijck 2013:31). This is emphasized in an article located in the Patreon Help Center called "My Responsibilities as a Patreon Creator":

What you create and share via Patreon is your product. Your community members are your customers. Your work is your product. You are not working for Patreon: rather you're working *for you*. We hope to make that as easy and as profitable for you as possible. You're running your own business on a platform created and supported by Patreon. We want to help in any way we can and at a high level we can work to resolve a lot, but things eventually devolve back to you. (Patreon 2020)

In this statement, Patreon is establishing a clear line of accountability between themselves and platform users. On one hand, it is intended to reinforce the platform's

professed neutrality in the neo-patronage relation by emphasizing that they are not an employer, but rather a mediator. On the other, they are confirming that it is platform users who are ultimately responsible for everything in the relation. As both fundraisers *and* business owners, users should consider what they produce to be a “product” and their patrons to be their “customers.” According to the logic of the company, it is then axiomatic that since it is *your* business, “things eventually devolve back to you.”

The “Terms of Use” and “Community Guidelines” sections of the Patreon website outline what Patreon users are legally responsible for in the relation. They codify rules of proper platform conduct, as well as provide Patreon a layer of “immunity” from the actions of platform labor (Van Doorn: 2017: 902). Specifically, they explain that users should not be dishonest or inauthentic (e.g. “[y]ou can’t create fake pages or collect money for things you’re not actually doing”) (Patreon 2020b), should not produce content (in the form of creations or patron rewards) which are hateful (e.g. “projects funding hate speech, such as calling for violence, exclusion, or segregation”) or pornographic (e.g. introduce “[c]reations or benefits with real people engaging in sexual acts”) (Patreon 2020b). Users may also be held responsible for what they do *outside* of Patreon: “If you are a creator raising funds on Patreon, we may be held accountable for what you do with those funds. As a result, we also look at what you do with your membership off our platform” (Patreon 2020b).<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> This rule in particular became a contentious issue in 2018, when Patreon banned a fundraiser from the platform for using offensive language in an off-platform interview (Bowles 2018). Patreon’s actions were viewed by a handful of other high-profile (and high-earning) Patreon fundraisers (most notably Jordan Peterson and Sam Harris) as an attack on “creator” free speech, and subsequently left the platform in protest. This highlights the fact that, in the end, Patreon is a private technology company who sets rules according to how they best suit the company’s own interests. In this case, Patreon is placing more importance on preserving their reputation as a “safe community” over an above whatever financial losses they may incur from the departure of Peterson, Harris or anyone else who feels that the platform censors free speech (Hart 2018)

These terms are also notable for what they *do not* require; for example, in a one-paragraph statement outlining the terms of “Membership,” it is nowhere indicated that “creators” are obligated to produce anything:

To become a creator simply launch your page to start your membership. Memberships are for your most passionate fans. You’re inviting them to be part of something exciting that gives them unique benefits they want, like additional access, merchandise, exclusivity, and engaging experiences. In exchange, patrons pay on a subscription basis. (Patreon 2020c)

While producing content is not mandatory, it is however stated that Patreon is mediating an “exchange” relation, and therefore users are expected to provide patrons with “unique benefits they want” in the form of content and interactions. Those who aspire to succeed on the platform should then anticipate taking on patron-accommodating roles as part of that relation.

Patreon’s power over its users is ratified through these legally-binding terms. By consenting to them, users place themselves in a subordinate positioning vis-a-vis the company and accept the responsibilities corresponding to their independent contractor status. As a Silicon Valley-based company, Patreon’s terms of use fall under California state law. Notably, on January 1, 2020, a new “gig work” law (California Assembly Bill No. 5, or AB-5) went into effect in the territory stipulating that companies must classify their workers as employees (as opposed to independent contractors)—*unless* they can satisfy three primary conditions concerning their status (Said 2019). According to the law:



...a person providing labor or services for remuneration shall be considered an employee rather than an independent contractor unless the hiring entity demonstrates that all of the following conditions are satisfied:

(A) The person is free from the control and direction of the hiring entity in connection with the performance of the work, both under the contract for the performance of the work and in fact.

(B) The person performs work that is outside the usual course of the hiring entity's business.

(C) The person is customarily engaged in an independently established trade, occupation, or business of the same nature as that involved in the work performed. (AB-5 Worker status: employees and independent contractors 2019-2020)

Based on these stipulations, the “hiring entity” is then solely responsible for proving that its workers are independent contractors. If they can not, those workers are then designated as employees and entitled to all the rights and protections accorded to them under the law (e.g. overtime, minimum wage, worker's compensation etc.). In particular, the law implicates the business models of labor and service-mediating platforms like Uber, who arguably do “control and direct” the performance of their drivers through the implementation of “algorithmic supervision” techniques (that track the driver's time, speed and route), as well as by setting ride prices and punishing drivers who reject trips and fail to maintain a good rating (Mishel and McNicholas 2019).<sup>76</sup>

However, when applying the law to Patreon, the company does appear exempt from classifying its fundraisers as employees. As fully independent creative workers, they can be legally interpreted as “free from the control and direction” of the company. They also perform work “outside the usual course” of Patreon's business (because the company's primary “business” is mediating exchange relations) and are “customarily

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<sup>76</sup> Notably, and despite the law, Uber still refused to classify its drivers as employees, arguing that “that the new legislation doesn't mandate the company to make a change but only applies a stricter legal test to determine if Uber's workers are truly independent contractors” (Ghaffary 2019).

engaged in an independently established trade...of the same nature as that involved in the work performed.” Consequently, and according to the platform’s “Terms of Use,” Patreon is permitted at their “discretion” to terminate the accounts of these independent contractors at anytime; the permission to use “Patreon is provided “as is” and without warranty of any kind.” In agreeing to these terms, users acknowledge that Patreon is not liable “for any incidental, consequential or punitive damages arising out of these terms” (Patreon 2020c). If a dispute should arise, “then it must be resolved by arbitration,” and that “[b]y agreeing to these terms” users waive their “right to trial by jury or to participate in a class action or representative proceeding” (Patreon 2020d).<sup>77</sup> In other words, should anything go wrong, Patreon fundraisers—as independent contractors—accept legal responsibility for everything concerning their membership.<sup>78</sup>

Patreon’s terms of use are also notable for legally conferring several rights and privileges to the company—the most stark example being the right (the platform gives itself) to use and exploit the content of Patreon “creators.” This is outlined in the “Your

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<sup>77</sup> Patreon recently updated their terms of use and removed this clause after dozens of patrons filed individual arbitration claims (in response to Patreon banishing a fundraiser they were supporting) (Cernovich 2020). Ultimately, Patreon was required to pay for all the legal fees involved in the arbitration process, potentially costing them millions of dollars. As of February 2021, the policy now reads simply: “If a dispute does arise out of these terms or in relation to your use of Patreon, then the dispute will be resolved in the federal or state courts located in San Francisco, California.” (Patreon 2020c)

<sup>78</sup> In many cases, platform companies’ ‘terms of service’ (TOS) contain ‘individual arbitration clauses’ (IAC) stipulating that grievances be settled through an arbitration process, as opposed to judicial resolution. Recent analysis by Garden (2017) found that such arbitration proceedings often “result in decisions that are non-precedential, secret, and applicable to only one worker at a time” (Garden 2017: 205-206). For the platform company, mandating arbitration prevents the possibility of costly and damaging class-action lawsuits. For platform labor however, it only confirms their individuated ‘contractor’ status by removing the possibility of any collective legal resolution which might challenge and redefine that status.

Creations” section of the Terms of Use, where it states that users must grant Patreon a wide-ranging, “royalty free” license to use their work:

By posting creations on Patreon you grant us a royalty-free, perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive, sublicensable, worldwide license to use, reproduce, distribute, perform, publicly display or prepare derivative works of your creation. (Patreon 2020c)

In another section, Patreon explains that this agreement is intended to provide a comprehensive license permitting them the right to use copyrighted “creator” content (images, logos, text, sounds etc.) in the course of overseeing everyday, “normal things” on the platform:

The state of copyright law requires us to receive a comprehensive license in order to host the copyrighted works of our creators. Otherwise, our creators could sue us for copyright infringement for doing any number of normal things with their creations. (Patreon 2020e)

Furthermore:

The purpose of this license is strictly limited to allow us to provide and promote memberships to your patrons. We will never try to steal your creations or use them in an exploitative way. (Patreon 2020e).

Although the company may never abuse or take advantage of this license, these are nevertheless the types of conditions that users must accept in order to gain access to the platform and its affordances. The fact that such starkly unequal terms are widely accepted as normal in the platform relation demonstrates the structural power these companies hold over individual users. In particular, terms like “perpetual,” “worldwide” and “irrevocable” do not leave much room for flexibility should circumstances change in the future.

In the neo-patronage relation, the terms of use are intended to elicit a specific type of fundraiser conduct; they mandate “what must be done” in the platform relation by indicating standards of user comportment and practices in accordance with Patreon’s accumulation imperatives. They outline proper fundraiser comportment and confirm the expectation that it is they alone who are responsible for acquiring patrons and doing what is necessary to retain them. In turn, they also confirm the platform company’s position as an apparently neutral facilitator of interactions and exchanges. Patreon’s role is not to employ its fundraisers, but to afford them the possibility to become “business owners” and entrepreneurs (within the strict parameters of the platform relation). Patreon therefore does not need to directly monitor or discipline users into producing anything; as platform labor, their fully autonomous, independent-contractor status already separates them from any direct oversight and/or responsibility of the company.

### **Patreon University**

Patreon also exerts power informally by authoritatively instructing users on the ‘best’ habits and practices of platform conduct. According to Patreon Senior V. P. of Product Wyatt Jenkins, part of what the company does is educate users on how to approach the neo-patronage relation more like a business: “There’s a tension between capitalism and art that exists in the world that we can’t untangle, we just have to do our best. So all the language in all the product is like teaching artists business. That’s the challenge we face everyday” (Peckham 2019a). In this case, the “challenge” for the company is to teach its users—many who may think of themselves foremost as artists—

about the necessity of treating Patreon like a “membership business” and approaching the neo-patronage relation as an entrepreneurial endeavor:

Even if a creator understands the membership concept and is excited about it, there’s still a big mental leap to make. Since it’s pioneering a new market, Patreon is essentially asking its customers to start a new business, with all the time commitment that entails. Membership brings recurring revenue but comes with recurring commitment.... Patreon is trying to accelerate the adoption of membership models by educating creators on the concept. (Peckham 2019a)

In order to inure vulnerable fundraisers to the habits and practices necessary for running a membership business, the company produces its own educational and informational texts in the form of advice columns, presentations, success stories, ‘how to’ articles and ‘best practices’ guidelines—which taken collectively, comprise a disciplinary discourse through which the neo-patronage relation is informally attached to entrepreneurial conduct.

These texts are primarily located on Patreon’s platform-hosted Blog and “creator university” called ‘Patreon U’ (Patreon 2020f). They are authored by a combination of “employees, collaborators, and experts” who collectively operate under the pen-name of “Patreon Team” (Patreon 2020g), as well as other staff members with job titles like “creator success lead” (Cavanah, 2020)) and even outside freelance writers (St. John 2019). According to Patreon, “[a]lthough many writers work together to create the Patreon voice, our main goal is the same: championing the creative class” (Patreon 2020g). On Patreon U, this “goal” is realized by instructing platform users on how to best convert their output—and crucially, *themselves*—into a business. According to the

company, it is where “you’ll learn all the necessary steps to get you on the right track to earning a sustainable income” (Patreon 2019).

Two prevailing narratives emerge from Patreon’s educational discourse. The first centers on liberation and empowerment, emphasizing the neo-patronage relation’s capacity to free creative and cultural producers from conventional market-mediators, thereby affording them more self-sustaining and self-realizing conditions for both work and creativity. The second narrative centers on self-responsibility, or ‘how one should act’ (in order to be successful), by equating “good” platform conduct with a more *accountable* self. Considering the former, narratives of empowerment, liberation and greater autonomy are often front and center. For example, one article called “Meet The Musician Who Sacrificed Fame to Pursue the Support of 1,000 True Fans,” depicts the modest Patreon success of South African singer-songwriter Nate Maingard.<sup>79</sup> The article begins by describing how established paths to success were failing him, and how Patreon offered an alternative:

“I’d been playing music all these years and no one had ever come up to me and said, ‘*You’re amazing. I want to make you a star,*’” he recalled...Success seemed out of his control, dependent on some mystery person who *might* show up at a gig someday and say, “You’re the one we want”... Things are different now. Today, he has a thriving, “symbiotic” community that supports him. (Seitz 2018a)

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<sup>79</sup> This again recalls the “1000 True Fans” thesis proposed by Wired Magazine executive editor Kevin Kelly back in 2008, wherein he describes how an artist can potentially “make a living” by securing the financial support of 1000 “super fans.” Kelly argues that these 1000 fans could send ‘direct, unmediated’ micropayments to the artist, which could then collectively amount to a substantial annual income. However, the formula only works if the artist is willing to become something *more* than an artist, as this new relation would presumably mean that they would be expected to consistently produce for—and attend to—these ‘super fans’ (in order to maintain ongoing income). At its core, this is the basic concept behind platform-mediated crowd-patronage models like Patreon. In both examples, the model’s viability depends to a great extent on the willingness of artists to accommodate a market-oriented, entrepreneurial identity.

Similar to the experiences encountered by Ne Obliviscaris prior to joining Patreon, Maingard had also confronted a music industries economy which appeared alienating, controlling and offered limited options to earn income outside established means and paths. Notably, both Maingard and Ne Obliviscaris expressed similar ideological views (despite inhabiting quite different musical worlds), revealing how Patreon's disciplinary discourse effectively traverses genre boundaries. Like Ne Obliviscaris, Maingard also presented the neo-patronage relation as a more empowering, autonomy-enhancing option:

“I had a sense of powerlessness because I didn't feel like I was in control of whether it worked or not. I just kept doing this thing that I thought was the thing I'm supposed to do and hoped that something would come of it. It's a very, very disempowering experience,” Nate recalled. Those feelings led to one key realization: “I'm going to have to do this myself.” (Seitz 2018a)

He then goes on to explain how self-empowerment hinged on adopting a more entrepreneurial identity—and one made possible by the the neo-patronage relation:

“At some point, I realized that being a musician and being an entrepreneur are identical,” he explained. So, he built the skill set needed to make his business — music — succeed. “That experience that I have through this community that I've grown with Patreon, I can't imagine doing it another way. I feel so empowered in that. I feel empowered to be able to talk directly to the people who care the most about what it is that I bring into the world. And Patreon helped me do it.” (Seitz 2018a)

In this example, Maingard presents autonomy as the outcome of embracing a more entrepreneurial subjecthood, ultimately conflating “empowerment” with a more market-oriented self. The narrative of fundraiser autonomy then hinges on the platform's gatekeeper-bypassing capacities which permit musicians like Maingard to develop a dual identity of artist-entrepreneur.

In another Patreon U article titled “How Zola Jesus Cut Out the Middleman to Engage With Her Fans Directly,” the disintermediating qualities of Patreon are once more on display. In this instance, the specter of the “middleman” arises again to “thwart” the creativity of independent artists: “Musician Nika Danilova, better known as Zola Jesus, has been in the music scene for the last decade. During that time, she has come to the realization that the model for independent artists is broken and the creativity that drives them is thwarted by challenges created by industry middlemen” (Vega 2019). Accordingly, the article identifies Patreon as the ideal solution: “That’s when Zola Jesus saw the advantages of the Patreon platform” as a means for her to “maintain independence” through the “symbiotic relationship of the Patreon community” (Vega 2019). In this example, the “industry middlemen” represent Patreon’s necessary ‘other’; one who stands in stark contrast to the neutral, unobtrusive and liberating affordances of the neo-patronage relation.

In an article called “Navigating the Music Industry,” the central theme is again shutting out the “middlemen” (although notably, the Patreon platform itself is never considered or identified as such): “In an industry where middlemen can often equal abandonment of their rights over their work, platforms like Patreon have become a safe haven where artists can share their art directly with their fans” (White 2019). Such ‘cutting out the middleman’ narratives have an enduring resonance; they appeal to the ethic of autonomous ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) production, as well as the allure of controlling one’s working conditions, owning one’s creative output and “evading the constraints of institutional processes” (McRobbie 2002:521). However, these narratives also overshadow what are often the precarious, isolating and self-exploitative conditions of



platform-mediated work—conditions which many working in the culture industries have long experienced as part of the territory (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010).<sup>80</sup> As Mark

Banks argues, freedom and constraint *grow together*:

In all forms of creative cultural work, the 'seduction of autonomy' is strong enough for workers to deny the hardships of individualized work and to eclipse the feelings of exhaustion and despair...cultural workers occupy a contradictory space where self-application leads to the enhancement of both personal freedom and constraint... [Consequently] the pursuit of individual freedoms provides a strong incentive to work, yet takes place within conditions set down by capitalist production and its associated mechanisms of governmental rule. (Banks 2007: 61)

In the case of Patreon and other labor-mediating platforms, the autonomy afforded by the neo-patronage relation appears compromised by the user's individuated and isolated position in the relations of production and the pressures arising from their independent contractor status. Moreover, not every Patreon fundraiser confronts capital from an equal standing; degrees and variations exist in capacities, identities, ethnicities and economic background which also condition the extent to which an individual producer can forge the type of entrepreneurial identity and engage the practices necessary to succeed in the neo-patronage relation. Ultimately, some fundraisers will be better capable of adjusting and adapting to these conditions than others. Such is the meritocracy of the Patreon model.

A second narrative in the discourse centers on “creator” self-responsibility and accountability. This is presented in the form of texts which underscore the importance of preparing oneself physically and mentally for the habits, roles and practices best-suited to

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<sup>80</sup> Hesmondhalgh and Baker found that creative and cultural workers are often “torn over the precariousness of their work—bemoaning the mental and emotional states produced, but also resigned to insecurity, and prepared to speak of it as necessary and even desirable” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010: 13). Consequently, “pleasure and obligation become blurred in a highly challenging way” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010: 18).

the neo-patronage relation. For example, one article called “How to Find a Work-Life Balance as a Full-Time Creator,” features an artist named “Kiri”, who stresses the need to “[t]ake responsibility for yourself...It’s part of your job to take good care of yourself. That way, you’ll be able to keep making amazing things to share with this world” (Hosmer 2019). In another article, “Beating Creator Burnout: 5 Tips for Managing Stress,” the emphasis is again on self-care:

We understand the pressures you experience as a content creator; that drive to create frequently, keep your audiences engaged on social media, and take care of all of the behind the scenes necessities, like editing, marketing, and business development. We also know it can lead to a perfect storm that’s intense, stressful, and ultimately lead to burnout. (Barringer: 2019)

In order to deal with these pressures, a number of “tips” are suggested, after which the author encourages Patreon users to ask themselves: “What are some ways you can set yourself up for mental health success?”

These narratives present self-accountability as a necessary attribute of successful fundraiser conduct. At the individual level, they confirm the “autonomy, and thus potential culpability, of the 'enterprising self,'” to the extent that “success and failure are understood as triumphs and tragedies of individual design” (Banks 2007:63). More broadly, they confirm the reality that platform companies like Patreon are not liable for the failure of any individual user—who as a “free” and entrepreneurial subject, is fully “responsible and guilty for his own “actions” and “behavior”” (Lazzarato 2015: 183). Aspiring Patreon users then learn that the empowerment and autonomy afforded by the platform are benefits sustained only by ‘taking care of oneself’—a mode of conduct in

line with the axiom that individual producers, as ‘enterprises of the self,’ should each and all bear the obligations of their endeavors.

### **The Axiom of Entrepreneurism**

How then are Patreon fundraisers constituted and composed as entrepreneurial subjects in the neo-patronage relation and in platform capitalism more broadly? In beginning to answer this question, recent analysis from Maurizio Lazzarato (2015) on neoliberal governmentality and debt provides an initial entry point. According to Lazzarato, the “hegemony of finance capital” is a defining condition of neoliberal political economies encompassing both functional and political dimensions. First, finance capital exhibits the functional power to organize and regulate how and when production occurs; it controls and mediates the flow of money capital which ultimately mobilizes international production processes in accordance with the interests of the capitalist class (Lazzarato 2015: 136-38). “Finance capital unifies industrial and commercial capital into a coherent whole” according to a logic of infinite accumulation—the driving, instrumental purpose of which is to use existing capital in order to acquire more capital, from any and all forms of socio-economic activity, public or private (Lazzarato 2015: 139). It is therefore “radically indifferent to the quantification of production (of automobiles, skills, yogurts, software, subjectivities, gender etc.,” as well as the “qualification of labor (industrial, cognitive, service, domestic, sexual, media etc.)” (Lazzarato 2015: 97). Finance capital is “hegemonic” because it establishes to a significant degree the conditions, possibilities and limits of economic and social life in neoliberal-governed production regimes.

Second, the hegemony of finance capital also displays a political dimension. Financial actors—in the form of private investment banks, venture capital firms, national and international lending institutions, trade organizations and wealthy individuals— govern and control the allocation and distribution of finance capital. Accordingly, they use this structural power to influence and rearrange public and state apparatuses in alignment with their political-economic interests. The weight of this influence is then applied to “reconfiguring and subordinating state principles to the valuation processes of capital” (Lazzarato 2015: 97). On one hand, this includes targeting and shaping the laws which control and regulate the power of finance in relation to the state, the market and society (e.g. those dealing with monetary policy, corporate and financial oversight, labor and environmental rules, bankruptcy law, contract and property rights and so on).<sup>81</sup> On the other, this involves the shaping of laws and policies which control, limit and regulate how, how much and from whom public wealth is extracted, and where/to whom it is redistributed (e.g. those dealing with fiscal policy, welfare, unemployment and so on).<sup>82</sup> In this instance, the “boundary between the state and corporate power has become more and more porous” as finance capital legally corrupts and reengineers the state in alignment with its own interests (Harvey 2007: 77-78). Consequently, the power of finance capital is wielded consensually in public institutions and apparatuses; it is

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<sup>81</sup> In particular, controlling monetary policy is a lynchpin of neoliberal state practice. After all, the “integrity and soundness” of the money supply is what guarantees the apparatus continues to function: in the event of a crisis, the “state has to step in and replace ‘bad’ money with its own supposedly ‘good’ money” in order to prop up the system (even if the crisis was the outcome of neoliberal policies in the first place, e.g. the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis) (Harvey 2007: 73). Moreover, the neoliberal state can also act *coercively* in the interest of finance capital, “resort[ing] to legislation and policing tactics (anti-picketing rules, for example) to disperse or repress collective forms of opposition to corporate power” (Harvey 2007: 77).

<sup>82</sup> As for example through fiscal policies which reduce taxes derived from capital gains, estates or investments (e.g. those which primarily affect the capitalist class), while also maintaining or increasing taxes on wages and salaries (Harvey 2007: 17).

legitimized in the laws, regulations and contracts which codify and reinforce its interests in everyday governance.

Finance capital therefore represents a powerful structuring force within neoliberal political-economies, one which sets limits and pressures upon citizens and workers alike to conform to its imperatives. To Lazzarato, this power is most clearly demonstrated in the pervasiveness of the creditor-debtor relation and its employment as a technique devised to draw subjects into more compulsory and dependent relations with capital. For finance capital, the debt relation is a means of controlling the future; it establishes an *ongoing* financial relation—and one legally prescribed in the terms of repayment with interest—which reinforces their power over a specific class of indebted citizens. Through credit cards, student loans, mortgages other means, finance capital induces economically vulnerable populations into peonage as a portion of their future earnings (from productive labor) are syphoned off (as unproductive interest). The debt relation then represents “a claim on future value production that can be redeemed only through value production,” which in turn makes it one of “the principal incentives and levers to ensure the further production of value and surplus value.” (Harvey 2017 80). Consequently, the “tentacles of indebtedness spread far and wide to implicate everyone who carries as much as a single credit card in their pocket” (Harvey 2017: 80). Finance capital relies on the neoliberal state apparatus to administer and enforce these debt relations, thereby constituting indebted citizens as “human capital” (Lazzarato 2015:185).

In platform capitalism, the hegemony of finance is reflected in the power of venture capital firms to provide critical financial lifelines to emerging platform companies. This also creates a symbiotic, dependent relation, wherein the imperatives of

finance capital become imbued into the operational logic of platform companies. These companies subsequently harness and organize platform labor in ways which serve the growth and valuation requirements of finance. In the case of Patreon, platform labor—designated as “creators”—are similarly purposed as “human capital,” in that they function as a source of ongoing rental income (in the form of recurring fees on financial transactions from patrons). The rent-seeking platform model is therefore emblematic of the perpetual-accumulation logic of finance capital: just as creditors seek to position debtors in a relation which requires ongoing interest payments, these platform companies seek to position users as sources of ongoing rent extraction.

In neoliberal political-economies, the operational logic of finance capital is *axiomatic*. In other words, its defining attributes (e.g. the creditor-debtor relation) appear as rational and inevitable features of economic life (Lazzarato 2015: 147-158). According to Deleuze and Guattari, “axioms” are “operative statements that constitute the semiological form of Capital and enter as component parts into assemblages of production, circulation, and consumption” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 461). As hegemonic precepts emerging from and alongside material economic processes, axioms embody “primary statements, which do not derive from or depend upon another statement” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 461). Ultimately, axioms require no justification or explanation and ‘go without saying’; they are the guiding principles through which neoliberal ethics and values are instilled in social consciousness and consolidated in its governing mechanisms.

For example, private property and wage labor are prevailing axioms of the capitalist mode of production. On one hand, they represent “functional” axioms which

rationalize and confirm the imperatives of capital accumulation and surplus value realization. On the other, they are also political axioms, in that they confirm power relations and prescribe conduct conducive with the interests of one class over another. From this perspective, the “modalities of government” in neoliberal political economies “do not depend on a logic or debate within liberalism, but on the axiomatics of ownership” (Lazzarato 2015: 148). Axioms therefore sanction and reinforce the class-defined ownership and control of the means of production; they set standards and enforce rules which when integrated into production practices, become regarded as “common sense” in neoliberal political economies (Hall and O’Shea 2013). “Axioms” are what guide and reinforce a hegemonic order, defined as a “lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming” (Williams 1977: 110). In other words, they are so naturalized and unarguable that they can be depended upon to ‘just work.’

In platform capitalism, axioms represent and reinforce the material interests of platform companies and the venture capital firms which back them. On Patreon and other labor-mediating platforms, the prevailing axiom is *entrepreneurism*; it is a precept which permeates the neo-patronage relation, from the terms of use, to Patreon’s “educational” material, to the practices and subject positions users adopt towards their patrons. As Patreon emphasizes to aspiring fundraisers: “Your work is your product. You are not working for Patreon: rather you’re working *for you*” (Patreon 2020). Accordingly, “creators” accept the responsibilities and requirements of the neo-patronage relation, which for many entails incorporating a new identity as entrepreneur and business owner. Patreon users are then elicited to develop and perform this entrepreneurial identity in

conjunction with the platform relation—whether or not they actually believe in the validity or desirability of that relation.

The elicitation and production of entrepreneurial subjects is critical to platform companies whose business models rely on the rent or surplus value generated by independent contractors. In the case of Patreon, they are elicited as entrepreneurs (and granted access to patrons) in the course of taking on the roles and identities of fundraisers. Just as in the creditor-debtor relation, “the purpose of subjection” is to produce individuals as “human capital” by constituting them as self-enterprising, self-accountable subjects; they should then expect “to be evaluated and calibrated according to the logic of losses and gains, supply and demand, investment...and profitability” (Lazzarato: 2015: 185). Patreon users represent an ideal type of neoliberal subject; insofar as they are “creators,” they are fully individuated, autonomous entrepreneurs—of and for themselves—who at the same time comprise an independent, external, yet governed labor force in the context of platform capitalism. Consequently, they can make no claim upon Patreon regarding any ‘right to a living’; Patreon only provides a medium through which the ‘living’ can be pursued (and only on Patreon’s terms).

In order to prosper, Patreon users must effectively maintain both artistic *and* entrepreneurial identities. Unless one is successful enough to hire employees, this means attending to *all* aspects of one’s creative and commercial lives—which often necessitates a deeper subjective integration of oneself with the capital relation (as for example, when these users continually market themselves to prospective patrons, create perks for existing ones and maintain mediated identities via constant promotion and interaction on



social media). However, the flipside of this entrepreneurial mode of autonomy is that the individual can become “[i]solated by freedom itself”:

Frustration, resentment, guilt and fear make up the “passions” of the neoliberal relation to the self, because the promises of self-realization, freedom and autonomy collide with a reality that systematically nullifies them...the full “sovereignty” of the individual—since the individual is the one who chooses, the one who decides, the one in charge—coincides with his full and complete alienation. (Lazzarato 2015: 186-187)

In other words, the outcome of an artistic-entrepreneurial subjecthood is potentially a more conflicted, alienated self—one whose ambitions for occupational control and autonomy are overshadowed by the social isolation and personal disaffection which are so often attributes of the neoliberal condition. In these cases, the greater autonomy Patreon users attain through the neo-patronage relation then appears diminished by the structural pressures and individual burdens inherent to their status as precarious platform labor.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter examined the economics and politics of the Patreon company and the neo-patronage relation. Patreon is a lean online platform company designed to accumulate capital from mediating financial transactions between platform users and their patrons. In the wider context of platform capitalism, Patreon is also a technology company heavily backed by millions in venture capital, whose first mover, near-monopoly position in the neo-patronage crowdfunding sector gives it power over a significant amount of creative production. As a result of this status, it has the ability to set

the terms and conditions according to which its roughly 100,000 fundraisers are technically able to access patrons and income. Patreon is therefore a concrete example of the market-making accumulation logic of platform capitalism; it is a logic exercised through the business imperatives of platform scaling, generating positive network effects and securing venture capital.

Patreon's business model is also dependent on harnessing and capitalizing on the power of platform labor—in this case, the fundraisers whose productive activity represents the source of revenue for the platform, obtained primarily in the form of rent. Notably, these fundraisers are not employees of Patreon; they are external, independent contractors who despite their central position in the platform's accumulation model, remain peripheral to the lean operating core of the company. Patreon's rent-seeking accumulation model is based on the total, aggregate fees the company collects from mediating micro-payments between patrons and fundraisers. On a secondary level, Patreon may also realize surplus value from productive labor *within* the company, namely from those Patreon employees engaged in providing additional "value-added" marketing services to higher-earning fundraisers.

At first glance, the neo-patronage model appears to represent a direct, independent means for remunerating creative and cultural workers. There is a democratic sheen to the crowdfunding process which appears rational; it seemingly quantifies the talent and entrepreneurial acumen of fundraisers and rewards the most deserving by letting fans and audiences decide who will receive their financial support. In order to sustain this relation, users must continually pitch themselves to prospective patrons (while also retaining existing ones) in the course of converting their productive activity

into a so-called “membership business.” These users are then elicited and impelled to adopt more formal entrepreneurial orientations which potentially challenge and contradict prevailing conceptions of artistic subjecthood.

On one hand, the platform may afford its users the means and resources through which to achieve an autonomous livelihood; yet on the other, these affordances are only realized by employing conduct, habits and practices conducive with a more enterprising self. In the neo-patronage relation, the necessity of becoming an entrepreneur is *axiomatic*; if one wants to be successful (in terms of accruing and maintaining patrons and income), one must internalize and adopt more entrepreneurial, risk-bearing and market-oriented practices and habits. Consequently, and despite attaining significant creative and occupational autonomy, Patreon fundraisers remain guided and pressured by entrepreneurial imperatives: they can either seize the “liberating” benefits and affordances of the neo-patronage relation, or continue to struggle through conventional means and mediators.

On Patreon, these imperatives are elicited and reinforced through formal and informal guidelines of platform conduct. On one level, they are guidelines which define the terms and requirements of platform use; they set formal rules regarding what is and is not possible for platform users to do in the neo-patronage relation as well as confirm their legal status as independent contractors. On another level, they appear informally in the discourse of Patreon’s educational and instructional media, taking the form of ‘best practices’ advice, tips and recommendations that collectively appeal to and augment entrepreneurial habits and practices and establish the unwritten codes of platform conduct. Throughout this instructional discourse, positive narratives of autonomy and

empowerment are balanced with those of self-responsibility and self-accountability, accustoming and encouraging fundraisers to take on entrepreneurial identities in the course of developing the neo-patronage relation.

Patreon fundraisers therefore enter into definite relations of economic exploitation and ongoing class subordination, but do so as autonomous, seemingly “empowered” entrepreneurial subjects. The tensions and contradictions which arise from this duality then demand a more concentrated analysis of the working experiences of the recording artists who actively use Patreon. In order to pursue this line of inquiry, the next chapter will focus on data drawn from direct interviews with Ne Obliviscaris band member and manager Tim Charles, as well as other recording artists who use Patreon in a similar capacity. The intention is to paint a more complete picture of how these entrepreneurial imperatives are shaping the actual perceptions, interpretations, hopes and fears of recording artists engaging the Patreon platform at some basic level of financial success.

## **Chapter 4: Occupational Rhetoric and Ideology: Heavy Metal Fundraisers**

### **4.1 Ideological Fault Lines**

This chapter traces subjective experience in the context of the institutions and practices outlined in previous chapters. It employs analysis of interview data given by recording artists working on Patreon, which illuminate similarities and differences in their occupational rhetoric and justifications of market orientations—how they define good and bad ways of making money. This approach takes its cue from Groce’s (1989) sociological study of local nightclub musicians in two cities in the United States. He found the “rhetoric and ideology” they expressed in talking about their work reflected their self-identification as either “entertainers” (oriented towards making money by performing ‘cover’ music) or as “artists” (who valued the creative process of writing original compositions). I put Groce’s analysis into dialogue with a recent study from Klein et al (2017) examining how notions of artistic integrity, autonomy and compromise are currently under reevaluation in light of new, digital-era financial opportunities. Their research found that the “core values relevant to cultural autonomy persist,” even as recording artists negotiate and test these new financial opportunities and the boundaries of commercial affiliations (Klein et al 2017: 13). Both studies consider ideology and economics together and help to frame my interviews diachronically and synchronically; in other words, they provide a comparative lens through which to triangulate and historicize evolving value-driven tensions in recording artistry in light of changing production relations.

Groce's analysis is set in the context of late-1980s local music proto-markets. In this world, money-making opportunities favored those musicians who could best accommodate audiences' demand to hear well-known popular music. Cover-bands and artists were more marketable, while economic opportunities for original songwriter-performers were much more limited. Groce found that these two types of musicians expressed ideological views shaped by quite different music-making orientations and goals. On one hand, the "entertainers" described their work primarily as an economic enterprise—their "occupational rhetoric" endorsed or valued the performance of "copy" (or "cover") songs for primarily financial ends. On the other, original music "artists" perceived their work as foremost a creative endeavor, adopting rhetoric which appealed to ideals of self-integrity, authenticity and the creative process as "a goal in itself" (Groce 1989: 399).

These diverging ideologies of "original" and "copy" musicians reflect two distinct interpretations of artistic accomplishment and professional status. Both copy and original music performers valued different aspects of their trade, which in turn informed how they described and explained their work. For the copy musicians, the goal was to make themselves marketable by adapting their work to meet audience preferences; they held "economic reward as a goal" (Groce 1989: 395). This meant not only being technically proficient, but being willing to prioritize the entertainment of their audiences above all else. Being in relatively high demand and relatively highly paid validated this orientation. On the other hand, the "original" music performers rejected this approach to professionalization as illegitimate; they viewed it as an audience-pandering practice prioritizing economic considerations over artistic creativity. In contrast, they interpreted

professional advancement as an endogenous endeavor, whereby audiences are “organically” built (and income attained) over time by attracting fans appreciative of their original compositions. To them, validation is conferred by audiences and mediators (e.g. managers, promoters, record labels) capable of discerning the creative talent of original music songwriters and performers.

Groce’s focus on these musicians’ rhetoric and ideology provides an entry point and analytical component for approaching a similar dynamic in the neo-patronage relation. It casts a spotlight on the underlying tensions which pervade popular music-making’s long entanglement with commerce and give rise for example, to cultural perceptions of ‘rock values,’ authenticity and ‘selling out’. In spite of recent and drastic changes in music industries’ markets, these ideologically-loaded views still inform and shape the occupational decisions of recording artists.

Klein, Meier and Powers draw these enduring ideological factors into contemporary relief, exploring how recording artists now confront a digital music economy where “dominant promotional logics” are increasingly the operational norm (Klein et al 2016: 6). The primacy of these “logics” are linked to the wider pervasiveness and normalization of marketing as a driver of 21<sup>st</sup> century exchange relations; to wit, marketing “tactics—image enhancement, reputation management, brand development, corporate partnership, and more,” now appear commonplace in cultural work fields as well as “embedded” features of digital platforms (Klein et al 2016: 7). Emergent marketing norms challenge and reorient formerly stable and distinct limits of (what are perceived to be) *acceptable* commercial orientations in recording artistry. They render enduring value categories like “authenticity,” “integrity” and “selling out” more elastic

and malleable in accordance with economic and transactional imperatives. In other words, the emergence and standardization of these “logics” bend and shift the “boundaries around which selling out has been historically policed and within which artistic integrity has been traditionally understood and maintained” (Klein et al 2016: 2).

For recording artists, these conditions invite a reconsideration of commercial affiliations in light of new income opportunities; consequently, many music-makers, “so eager to be heard and make a living, may no longer worry about who is paying the bills, as long as they are paid” (Klein et al 2016: 3). As artists adopt these more entrepreneurial, “promotional logics” in light on new economic realities, the fault lines which once clearly demarcated recording artists on either side of the “selling out” divide began to fracture. In terms of Groce’s categories, the opposing moral positions of “artist” and “entertainer” are rendered more abstract and indefinable in the contemporary context.

The Patreon platform encourages and rewards these promotional logics. They permeate its “best practices” guidelines and confirm habits and comportments best-suited for attracting and retaining digital patrons (Patreon 2020; Patreon 2020f; Patreon 2019). In the following analysis, these logics emerge in the occupational rhetoric of these recording artists-cum-Patreon “creators.” Following Groce’s approach, I interpret interviewees’ statements about their Patreon practices as “vocabularies of motive” employed to justify and rationalize their decisions and choices concerning the neo-patronage relation (Groce 1989: 394; Mills 1963). Ideology harmonizes the discord between practices and values; it projects political meanings, claims and arguments concerning social phenomena stemming from one’s material conditions and “practical activity” (Eagleton 1991:12). For these recording artists, that “practical activity”—their



work and level of self-investment in the Patreon model—in the context of a still-pressing antinomy of entertainment and artistry, correlates to ideological views shaped by those activities.

In popular music-making, recording artists' views of the limits of legitimacy represent 'fault lines' which bend and shift in response to changing production relations. These lines are drawn to the surface whenever recording artists make choices regarding money-making opportunities or confront market-orientations that challenge their self-understood integrity and/or authenticity. In the context of Groce's nightclub proto-markets, they emerged in the differing market orientations and goals of "artists" and "entertainers": the former prioritized original composition, interpreting the market as a means of validating their creative acumen and songcraft while disavowing economic motives; the latter prioritized making money, viewing the performance of cover music purely as an economic opportunity. Ne Obliviscaris seems to occupy the position of Groce's entertainers, approaching the neo-patronage relation as an economic opportunity; one which offered the potential for them to make music on a full-time basis while performing an extreme brand of metal that is often not profitable in purely commercial terms.

In both the nightclub relation and in the neo-patronage relation, critics and detractors espousing pre-digital rock values viewed the more market-oriented artists negatively, reflecting the extent to which many critics—both then and now—cling to older, idealized notions of rock authenticity in cases where financial opportunities appear to contradict established norms of artistic professionalization and/or legitimacy. As evidenced by the backlash encountered by Ne Obliviscaris (outlined in Chapter 2 of this

dissertation), these pre-digital rock values have an enduring pull; they are still perceived as standards of authentication. This chapter traces these ideological fault lines by examining the interviewed recording artists' interpretations of markets in light of the findings outlined in Groce and Klein et al's analysis. The aim is to give subjective dimension to earlier chapters by examining how these recording artists interpret their work as Patreon fundraisers in light of persistent rock values and with respect to their differing economic positions.

## **4.2 Interviews**

I conducted in-depth and semi-structured interviews via face-to-face video-calls in June of 2020. I chose these artists based on their own public Patreon campaigns, with each having at least three years' experience working on the platform. The artists were also chosen based on their affiliation with the metal music genre which serves as the primary area of analysis for this dissertation. By choosing a handful of different artists working within the same specific field, I could then contrast their interpretations of working with the Patreon model according to well-established values in rock and metal music-making. It is also acknowledged that examining the working experiences of white male metal recording artists does limit the applicability of the analysis to other categories of experience and identity. However, the hope is that the interpretations gained through these interviews still might illuminate some of the core, universal problems encountered by recording as they navigate these new platform-mediated financial opportunities.

In order to address subjective questions arising out of earlier chapters, the interviews focused on these artists' income struggles, their views concerning their work

and their rationale for using Patreon. The discussions were also informed by my own personal experiences as a working recording artist for over two decades. As a researcher with insider status, I am familiar with these markets and the power relations which infuse them. Despite this, I worked to remain reflexive throughout the interview process and chose not to interject with or communicate my own experiences. Rather, I used my knowledge to help build general rapport, open the conversation and instill a level of mutual respect and comfortability in discussing (what can often be) sensitive economic topics.

The first musician I interviewed was Tim Charles, the violinist, vocalist and manager of the Australian progressive metal band Ne Obliviscaris. As detailed in the case study in Chapter 2, the band is a paragon of Patreon success, earning approximately USD\$430,000 through the platform from a monthly average of 873 patrons between March 2016 and June 2020 (Graphtreon 2020). The second musician interviewed was vocalist Riley McShane of American progressive metal band Allegaeon (pronounced ‘uh-lee-juhn’). Between October 2016 and June 2020, the band received approximately USD\$91,002 from a monthly average of 221 patrons (Graphtreon 2020a). The third musician interviewed was Creston Spires of the American noise rock/metal band Harvey Milk, who uses Patreon based on his status as an individual singer-songwriter. From September of 2017 to August of 2020, Spires earned approximately USD\$18,347.04 from a monthly average of 137 patrons (Graphtreon 2020b). The data from these interviews were in cases supplemented with secondary sources, e.g. statements and/or comments the subjects provided on podcasts, online interviews or their social media. The interviewees’ responses were then analyzed using categories constructed from the work of Groce

(1989) and Klein et al. (2017) which highlight varying interpretations of *dependency*, *obligation*, *entrepreneurism* and conflict over ‘*rock values*.’

### 4.3 Dependency

For these metal recording artists, taking on fundraiser roles and orientations introduced experiences of dependency corresponding to their varying views of their work. Each artist stated that patron income provided a critical revenue stream, yet each embraced and endorsed Patreon in different ways, to different degrees. For Tim Charles and Ne Obliviscaris, their Patreon endeavor remains essential to their economic security and the sustainability of their work as professional recording artists:

If it was not for [Patreon], I don’t think there would be any money available to pay anyone [in the band]. Literally, if you took away the Patreon income, that’s like over 90% of the band’s net profit for each financial year...we were propped up by these new methods of financial remuneration. (I/Charles 2020)

Ne Obliviscaris are financially tethered to Patreon and fully dependent on its capacity to mediate their transactions with patrons: “[f]or us it was go hard or go home...this was our career on the line” (I/Charles 2020). The relation’s more marketing-centric requirements were an acceptable tradeoff for the opportunity to be full-time recording artists (a status which had eluded them under conventional paths and means), reflecting the extent to which “musicians draw and re-draw [ideological] lines in order to survive” (Klein et al 2017:2).

Charles and his band have embraced the platform’s logic to the extent they see no tension or contradiction between their fundraising and creative work. In his words, they

are providing their patrons with “things, an experience, a service” (I/Charles 2020). Much like the entertainers in Groce’s study, Charles expresses a marketing-oriented logic focused on “monetary reward” (Groce 1989:395). Ideologically, they are firmly entrenched on the side of the Patreon-style market, which they perceive as a forward thinking move away from values of the past. However, Charles’ enthusiastic acceptance of Patreon’s affordances comes at the price of giving a technology company a great deal of control over a vital income stream (as well as 5% monthly cut of their earnings). In other words, the status of fundraiser is not without its qualifications, limits and pressures—particularly when the ‘new boss’ is an online platform like Patreon.

On the other hand, Riley McShane and his bandmates in Allegaeon do not embrace Patreon to the same extent as Ne Obliviscaris, nor are they as dependent on it. For them, the neo-patronage relation was never intended to be an all-encompassing “go hard or go home” solution, but more a stopgap to hold them over until revenue from other, more established means might replace it. In 2016, the band found themselves in bad financial circumstances; they had undertaken several money-losing tours and incurred significant debt, compelling them to turn to Patreon for relief (Allegaeon 2016). In the ensuing years, the income they received from their patrons helped the band financially recover. As McShane explains, it provided “a financial buffer [which allowed us to] pay the bills and the business overhead when we weren’t out there actively touring” (I/McShane 2020). To them, Patreon was a temporary solution:

If Patreon shut down tomorrow, it would affect us for sure, but we wouldn’t be in the same dire straits as we were when we started it. Basically, the income we have seen from Patreon has helped us develop other areas of our business, so that we don’t need Patreon anymore. But I do believe that if we didn’t have our Patreon during the past four years

when we were developing those other areas of our business, that we would be struggling a lot more than we are now. (I/McShane 2020)

Their perceptions of their work and how to sustain it were molded in pre-digital norms and practices which they still held as more desirable. In this case, Patreon was a provisional move. The requirements of being a fundraiser and accommodating patrons were unappealing in the long run; the band were still attached to means and practices ideologically considered more legitimate and/or valid. Much like the artists in Groce's study—and unlike Ne Obliviscaris—Allegaeon were reluctant to submit themselves to Patreon's more service-oriented roles in order to secure more patrons and income. In terms of Klein et al's analysis, they never fully embraced Patreon's "promotional logics" nor 'bought in' to its entrepreneurial elicitations.

In contrast to Ne Obliviscaris' enthusiasm and Allegaeon's reluctance, Creston Spires exhibits a much more instrumental and ambivalent view of Patreon. He wholly endorses the model and welcomes the income it has brought him, however he remains disinterested with its more marketizing invitations: "[m]y relationship with Patreon is not very deep. I just do one thing, that's it....I do get emails from [Patreon representatives] from time to time, about new things they are having or offering, but I always delete them" (Spires I/2020). Moreover, he retains a day-job as a teacher—the income of which affords him the economic leeway to discount his music labor and products on Patreon. Consequently, he is not as dependent on Patreon to "make ends meet" and his needs and expectations are much more modest. This is emphasized in the single-tier model based on a per-month flat rate payment of USD\$3.72 per patron (Spires 2020). In return, he offers a generous supply of new, original music every month as well as access to a back catalog

containing roughly eight hours of recordings (I/Spires 2020). When I talked to him, he expressed neither financial dependency on Patreon, nor any intention of using it to supplement other areas of his work:

I just see Patreon as a blunt tool. I record and mix audio and upload it to my patrons, that's it...Of course I had dreams of having thousands of patrons, but the fact I am still hovering around 140 right now is remarkable...I am proud of the output, so that is success to me. I don't begrudge the percentage Patreon takes for the service they provide. (Spires I/2020)

Notably, Spires rejects the market-engagement tactics necessary for acquiring and maintaining a larger number of patrons. Although he was once a full-time touring and recording artist, the Patreon model fits his current part-time approach to music-making. Spires views the market as a means which supports his creative music-making work, rather than an end to which it should adapt. To him, his Patreon endeavor is already a creativity-enhancing “success.” Ideologically, he appears to share a pragmatism with the entertainers in Groce’s study. He approaches Patreon as a “blunt tool” which facilitates an instrumental exchange of music for money and requires little effort outside of his compositional work. However, at the same time, he does not seek to “maximize economic reward” and has little interest in the entrepreneurial tactics that for example, Ne Obliviscaris employ.

#### **4.4 Obligation**

The interviewees also recounted how their fundraising roles and orientations introduced varying experiences of obligation. For Ne Obliviscaris, this was initially tied to their minimum wage goal of reaching USD\$15,000 (or USD\$3000 per member) per

month from patron-income alone (see Chapter 2 of this dissertation). However, according to Tim Charles, this became less of a priority over time:

Right now the [minimum wage goal] has been a little bit sidelined, but part of the reason for that is because we started to make money on our tours...so yeah, there has been pressure over time, but because the band became more successful it took some of [it off] . So the goals changed to focus on maintaining the levels [of Patreon income] that we already had. (I/Charles 2020)

Despite not reaching their original goal, Ne Obliviscaris still relies on a significant amount of ongoing, monthly income from patrons. Accordingly, the burden to continually accumulate new patrons never really goes away. As Charles explains: “even if we do everything amazing on every single tier, there is a natural attrition of members, because peoples’ circumstances change. People lose their job, get married and so on. So, the key we learned is to always make sure we are accruing new members” (I/Charles 2020).

Charles’ business-like focus on the numbers indicates an acceptance of the “promotional logics” outlined by Klein et al. On one hand, his assessment appears “calculated, inorganic, and advertising-esque”; patrons are positioned as economic inputs to be acquired and maintained in order to offset their “natural attrition” (Klein et al 2017:7). On the other, Charles enacts Patreon’s own growth and rent-seeking imperatives; he is aligning the band’s money-making interests with the quantitative logic of the platform. On Patreon, patron and income numbers are often starkly calculated on a monthly basis on a “creator’s” frontpage. Much like the economic relations between feudal serfs and lords, the artist-patron exchange relation occurs out in the open; Ne Obliviscaris’ patronage-income and Patreon’s percentage-as-rent—are fully “transparent”



(Burawoy 1979: 22). For Ne Obliviscaris (and other users who openly display their earnings data), this readout publicizes the insecure and precarious nature of the neo-patronage relation—one whose sustainability relies on the fundraiser’s capacity to continually maintain the interest of evanescent patrons.

For Riley McShane and Allegaeon, these fundraiser-pressures were experienced more as a form of guilt, based on the belief they were not living up to patrons’ expectations in terms of providing sufficient content:

When we first started and there was a ton of buzz around it...we got close to hitting our first milestone of USD\$5000 [per month]...Since that never happened, everybody still had to work...so that generating content at the rate we had initially promised became pretty much impossible. And that’s unfortunate, because part of us feels almost disingenuous because of how we framed it in that way and then weren’t able to deliver, even this many years later. I feel like we are not giving our fans what they rightfully should be getting from our Patreon, and I don’t want to be a band or a business that takes advantage of the people who support them. (I/McShane 2020)

According to this statement, McShane perceives their inability to live up to their content-generating promises as a moral failure (e.g. patrons should “rightfully” be getting their content). Their reluctance to fully embrace their fundraiser status—and the “disingenuousness” they felt—reveals the extent to which the “values and ideologies [which structure] artistic integrity persist” in new platform-mediated relations (Klein et al 2017: 13). As a result, Allegaeon deprioritized their content-generating practices in order to preserve that integrity. Much like the artists in Groce’s analysis, they disavowed any deeper market-orientations for purposes of “economic reward” (Groce 1989: 395).

As Allegaeon’s case demonstrates, the perceived obligation to compensate patrons with content, perks and interactions may overwhelm those fundraisers who are

not adept or open to more marketing and/or entrepreneurial tactics. In a recent study, Langley and Leshon (2017) provide a critical assessment of crowdfunding's purported disruptive and democratic qualities. They found that crowdfunding—and in particular donation and rewards-based models (e.g. Patreon, Kickstarter)—makes fund-seekers susceptible to “claims and obligations” which recall those of the credit-debt relation, potentially mitigating the platform's benefits. In other words, the tasks which comprise the “non-monetary obligations” of crowdfunding—e.g. providing content and perks—“can weigh heavily on those seeking to keep their promises to the crowd in ways that echo the reciprocal requirements of gift exchange” (Langley and Leshon 2017b: 1029). Unlike the abstractness of debt, which can be settled with cash and without social niceties, gift exchange is personal and particular. Consequently, “the disruption to extant debt dynamics promised by crowdfunding may also prove to be somewhat hollow [as] the obligations take a non-monetary form that contrasts with the repayment requirements of a bank loan” (Langley and Leshon 2017b: 1029). For Allegaeon, this “hollowness” was crystalized in the insincerity they felt after failing to provide an adequate amount of content. Ultimately, they were unprepared to fulfill their patron-catering roles and duties to a level they were morally comfortable with. In terms of Klein et al's analysis, they were engaged in a “corporate collaboration” whose service-oriented dispositions and values were ultimately incompatible with what they were willing to give in return (Klein et al 2017: 10).

Allegaeon tested the waters of the neo-patronage relation only to find its more explicit fundraiser practices untenable; subsequently, they reversed course back onto more comfortable ideological terrain:

The idea the entire time has been like, lets offer a way for people to directly support us, lets give them something in return to make it worthwhile, and use this direct support as a way to stabilize our business, so we can get back to being a regular band without this extracurricular thing that we have to do. (I/McShane 2020)

Allegaeon yearned to get back to being a “regular band” as soon as possible—a proclamation which reveals not only their hesitancy to fully engage the imperatives of this new field of platform-mediated income, but the enduring appeal of pre-digital music industries’ money-making practices (e.g. recording, touring, merchandise etc.).

Again, an ideological fault line appears as Allegaeon are pulled in one direction by established practices, and in the other by platform-mediated fundraising opportunities. Unlike the well-defined ideological boundaries separating artists and entertainers in Groce’s study, the fault lines which separate different types of Patreon fundraisers are still being tested and negotiated. In this instance, McShane’s queasiness towards Patreon is comparable to that of an original-composing artist who is reluctantly compelled to perform cover music out of economic necessity. In that nightclub-world, catering to audiences was not something which *true* artists did, but rather something entertainers did for economic motivations. Likewise, for those artists who reluctantly turn to Patreon out of economic necessity, being a fundraiser is an unwanted “extracurricular” endeavor; to them, catering to patrons is not fundamentally what recording artists should be doing.

In contrast, Creston Spires performs no additional or supplementary tasks outside of his compositional and recording work. As a simple exchange model, his patrons expect only exclusive access to new recordings. However, he does feel (what he calls) an “obligation” towards them; one which he describes as something not unlike a contract relation:

I feel, not pressure, but like I've entered into a contract...Its kind of amazing to me when you think about it, that these people have put me on their credit card bill, right next to Netflix...that's just very humbling and an honor. I just don't want to disappoint those people you know? So my part of the contract is to provide them with music each month...That contract, that obligation that I feel, has forced me to pump out this material so my patrons can get their money's worth. (I/Spires 2020)

In this statement, Spires' perception of the neo-patronage relation as a "contract" implies that he must *produce*. Accordingly, his patrons are considered (and treated) more like clients to be continually provided for, lest they be "disappointed." Despite his rejection of Patreon's more explicit market and retail-oriented invitations, he still exhibits a compulsion to keep his patrons happy. In other words—echoing the obligations of a recording contract—he is driven to be compositionally productive within a specific timeframe (despite how autonomous it may feel as a creative practice). He recognizes their support and he is in awe of their willingness to put his name on their credit cards ("right next to Netflix"). In return, he feels "forced" to "pump out new material" in order to satisfy his end of the "deal," adopting an audience-catering position much like that espoused by Groce's entertainers. Like them, Spires is invoking a "positive audience orientation" which positions his patrons much like customers 'to be served' (Groce 1989: 396).

Spires reveals an acceptance of market ideologies, despite a stated disavowal of them. At one point, I asked Spires if he perceived his Patreon as "a membership business," to which he replied: "definitely." However, later in the interview he expressed the opposite, stating "I do not describe what I do as any kind of business. If it was, then I would make an effort, I would have an Instagram, a Twitter...I've never been a person

motivated by the idea of maximizing profit” (I/Spires 2020). Not clearly identifying with Groce’s artists or entertainers, Spire’s position reveals how contemporary ideological boundaries are less rigid than in 1980s local rock scenes.

According to Klein et al, many artists occupy what they call a “necessary halfway house between staunch independence and unabashed selling out” (Klein et al 2017:10; Banks 2010: 252). Formerly distinct ideals of autonomy may be “compromised” and/or “negotiated” in the course of experimenting with new ways of making money from platform-mediated income opportunities. The term “halfway house” is also revealing; it implies that these artists are somehow in rehab or recovery until they find a way to resolve the ideological tensions which underlie more overt corporate affiliations and financial opportunities. For Spires, this unresolved tension is apparent in the ambiguity he expresses between an outward rejection of market-orientated roles and practices, and an inward “obligation” to give patrons “their money’s worth.”

#### **4.5 Entrepreneurism**

On the surface, the roles and practices taken on by Patreon fundraisers appear consistent with the wider entrepreneurization of recording artistry (Dumbreck and McPherson 2016; Tessler and Flynn 2016; Nelson 2016, Kusek 2014; Leger 2014; Weisser 2012). Concerning this, I asked these recording artists if they considered themselves entrepreneurs or if they saw any contradiction in being both an artist and an entrepreneur. For Tim Charles, there was no hesitation:

I have viewed myself as an entrepreneur for quite a long time...You can’t really separate one from the other...they go hand in hand, because the more I learned [about] the business, the more it helped my own band...I

just can't compartmentalize, we just write music we love, created as art. But when its done, I then draw a line, and say okay, well now I have a *product*; now we have to think about this from a business perspective, and how do we monetize this. (I/Charles 2020)

Like the entertainers in Groce's study, Ne Obliviscaris "follow their definition of themselves as money makers"; they are explicitly seeking to "monetize" their music (Groce 1989: 396).

Charles' unabashed entrepreneurial approach reveals his adaptation to market-oriented roles and practices developed via experiences described earlier in Chapter 2. On one hand, this is an example of how "market(ing) logic has extended its reach and normalized its presence, so that its tactics—image enhancement, reputation management, brand development, corporate partnership, and more—have turned into common practices" in creative work fields (Klein et al 2017: 7). On the other, it reveals the extent to which such "promotional logics" work upon and tap into rock recording artists' characteristic desire to bring their own music to an audience. These "logics" channel that desire; they offer practical tools and rationales that draw on and reinforce notions of an "entrepreneurial self" (Bröckling 2015). Endogenous marketizing "logics" combine with recording artists' subjective aspirations to be known and heard, providing a powerful lure for anyone hoping to exchange their music-making skills for money. Charles and Ne Obliviscaris have enthusiastically embraced this logic and made it their own.

On the other hand, and like Groce's paradigmatic artists, Riley McShane rejects any explicit, market-oriented identifications. To him, entrepreneurs are "snarky go-getters" whose business-centric focus clearly separates them from what he describes as "creative, right-brained" musicians:

I think [the term entrepreneur] is a bit of an exaggeration. I don't think that musicians have to be entrepreneurs...I just don't think that that word applies to metal or musicians in general. There are musicians out there that are very entrepreneurial... but I don't think that its a requirement or something that happens in often enough frequencies to be like "oh yeah, musicians are entrepreneurs." (I/McShane 2020)

For McShane, there is a fundamental difference between an "entrepreneur" in the *business* sense of the word, and being a business-savvy musician: "that is what a band is, when it boils down to it, it's a small business that is "owned" by the band...you need someone that understands how business works" (I/McShane 2020). However, running a business is more or less what an entrepreneur does, and if a band is fundamentally "a small business," they are likely engaging tactics and practices intended to develop it. They may hire employees (sound engineers, tour managers etc.) and seek ways to elevate their "brand" and connect with audiences.

McShane's reluctance to equate the word entrepreneur with any kind of band business discloses its variable meanings. In this instance, McShane dances around the tension; he prefers to mitigate its more market-centric connotations, perceiving recording artists as primarily "creative, right-brained" people, who engage entrepreneurial work on a secondary level out of necessity. In contrast, Tim Charles chooses to elevate these market-centric connotations. To him, being *both* an artist and entrepreneur are reinforcing attributes of a singular, business-minded identity: "[y]ou can't really separate one from the other."

McShane's views show up in recent research by Haynes and Marshall (2018) who found a general "reluctance" among recording artists to identify as entrepreneurs. In their study focusing on musicians' views of entrepreneurship (centering on group of "signed,"

mid-to-lower level recording artists in the southwest of England), they found that “entrepreneurialism was not a value to which they aspired but, in their view, was thrust upon them because of the conditions of the contemporary music industry” (Haynes and Marshall (2018:472). Consequently, the entrepreneurial practices they engaged in the course of their work—including strategizing and enacting ways in which to sell their music and performances—were domesticated as a “normal part of a working musician’s arsenal” (Haynes and Marshall 2018: 467). Similarly, McShane’s reluctance to engage the more overtly self-commercializing aspects of Patreon is tempered by his understanding that some basic business knowledge is vital for economic survival. Despite this, he still prefers making money like a “regular band” whose work focuses on conventional income streams (e.g. live performance, royalties and merchandising), rather than those of a fundraiser. For him, there is a perception that Patreon work is “extracurricular” work; it is work which impels users to be “entrepreneurial by necessity rather than choice” (Haynes and Marshall 2018: 471-72).

#### **4.6 Patreon and ‘Rock Values’**

This section examines how these recording artists explained and reconciled their fundraising work in response to negative, ‘rock values’-laden criticism. As recounted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, Ne Obliviscaris experienced a quite public backlash to the announcement of their Patreon campaign. In response, band leader Tim Charles engaged their critics and presented arguments and claims intended to legitimize their decision to join Patreon. Similarly, Allegaeon also encountered a backlash to their announcement and received nearly identical forms of criticism questioning their integrity and



authenticity. In both cases, these artists were placed on the defensive as their efforts to make money through a new platform-mediated opportunity were rendered infamous through widespread negative media attention (Rhombus 2016; Lambgoat 2016; Bean 2016, Mish 2016; Jameson 2016; Divita 2016).

In Charles' view, the fear of receiving a similar backlash is primarily what deters other artists from following in their footsteps:

I think that people saw what happened to us, people saw what happened to Allegaeon, because they had a huge backlash as well...and they worry about putting themselves out there, putting themselves in a position that risks them falling flat on their face and looking stupid. (I/Charles 2020)

In other words, most rock and metal recording artists do not want to be seen as engaging in invalid and/or inauthentic practices, nor seen as “begging” or “selling out.” As Charles confirms, such rhetoric remains a powerful deterrent when it comes to being among the first to transgress perceived boundaries of legitimacy.

According to Klein et al, “threats to established revenue streams, especially record sales, have justified increasing involvement in activities that previously would have been classified as selling out” (Klein et al 2017: 4). In the case of the neo-patronage relation, these justifications are drawn to the fore as recording artists negotiate their Patreon endeavors in light of late 20<sup>th</sup> century ideals of authenticity, integrity and professionalization in recording artistry. On one hand, Allegaeon's queasiness towards Patreon's fundraiser roles and practices reveals the enduring power of these ideals as well as the allure of traditional revenue streams that do not involve “extracurricular” marketing activities. On the other hand, Ne Obliviscaris saw no issue with asking their audience to help them fund a world tour and earn a minimum wage; to them, it was not so

much “selling out” as it was “cashing in” on a financial opportunity. Consequently, these platforms’ ubiquity, seeming neutrality and autonomy-enhancing capacities are persuading some recording artists to reconsider their options.

In Groce’s study, the rhetoric of illegitimacy and ‘selling out’ appears in elementary form: musicians make choices on whether to perform cover music or original music, stipulating a clear ideological divide between art-for-art’s-sake practices and music-performance-for-money practices. Notably, the entertainers did not denigrate the artists’ orientations; they respected them and their choices and would be artists themselves if “the money was there and the gigs were good” (Groce 1989: 404). On the other hand, the artists’ ideological positioning *depended* on judging and negating the market-orientations of the entertainers as something shameful: “original music performers spoke rather disdainfully of copy musicians, accusing them of taking the easy way out and being interested only in making money” (Groce 1989: 406). To these artists, performing copy music is devalued as a technical, mercenary undertaking; accordingly, any competent musician can learn someone else’s songs (Groce 1989:403). Similarly, almost *anyone* can join Patreon. There are no minimum requirements of skill or aesthetic standards among its users that would ensure basic levels of “originality,” “authenticity” or “worthiness” according to any shared cultural value system. Patreon appears to provide an “easy way” of bypassing the dues-paying trials and necessary hardships involved in getting access to audiences and forging and maintaining conventional income streams. To critics, “success” as a fundraiser then appears to correspond to a technical adeptness at marketing and retail-work—a practice which assigns undue value to commercial competence and expertise over and above artistic and creative qualities.

According to Riley McShane, the backlash they encountered has origins in a specific iteration of metal-music ideology, one where authenticity—or “trueness”—corresponds to conventional late-20<sup>th</sup> century markers of professional advancement:

There’s this weird phenomenon that occurs in metal, more so than other genres of music, where a band you like does something to make themselves more comfortable as a business, or as professionals, or artists, or even if they don’t do that thing and it kind of just falls in their lap and all of sudden they are very successful, it’s like they lose clout. They lose that “true” metal element to them...That whole idea that you just have to be eating shit to be a valid metal band is insane to me. (I/McShane 2020)

In this scheme, to be perceived as “valid” and/or worthy of an audience’s favor, the artist should endure a demonstrated period of developmental hardship (e.g. opening shows for little or no money, recording demos, slowly building a fanbase etc.). As outlined in Chapter 2, these are perceptions rooted in persisting “industrial work ethic” principles of apprenticeship and occupational advancement (Weeks 2011:45-46). In this instance, these principles intersect with heavy metal’s own masculine “blue-collar ethos,” whose origins and “mythologies” can be traced to white, working-class youth culture in the 1970s (Weinstein 2000:113-114). According to Weinstein, the “antifemale posturing of heavy metal stars relates less to misogyny than to a rejection of the cultural values associated with femininity...Power, the essential inherent and delineated meaning of heavy metal, is culturally coded as a masculine trait” (Weinstein 2000:67).

Like Ne Obliviscaris, Allegaeon also encountered criticism which portrayed their Patreon endeavor as weak and/or unmasculine. In one notable example, the frontwoman of the Canadian punk band White Lung wrote a vitriolic public “letter” to the band, stating: “Dear Pussies...congratulations, Allegaeon! You are officially the laziest, most

pathetic, sub-human beta males in America” (Barber-Way 2016). According to McShane, these types of comments reflect a distorted perception of crowdfunding as essentially feminine work, which he believes may stem from the fact that Patreon is used by a substantial number of female adult content-creators<sup>83</sup>:

Before, Patreon was actually used by a lot of sex workers—and still is—as a means of direct income from the people who are consuming their product. I think that when bands and musicians started flocking to Patreon, there was this shitty incel backlash; like “oh, what are you cam-girls now?” (I/McShane 2020)

In this view, otherwise “professional” recording artists—much like “cam girls”—appeared to be unashamedly offering perks, interactions and experiences in exchange for money, leading some critics to insinuate that the neo-patronage relation was something akin to performing online sex work, or at worst, a form of prostitution. In other words, Patreon users appeared to be vulgarly prioritizing exchange value over artistic integrity, thereby overemphasizing the transactional nature of the relation (to the detriment of more authentic modes of interaction). To Patreon’s more vehement sexist critics in these metal scenic-spaces, being a fundraiser contradicts this enduring ideology of masculine power. To them, it is the opposite of the empowering work of metal music-making; it constitutes a passive, unmanly endeavor which neuters the artist’s exceptional status.<sup>84</sup>

In Creston Spires’ view, this exceptional status is challenged and corrupted when a recording artist takes on the role of fundraiser:

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<sup>83</sup> As recently as 2017, 27% of the top-earning Patreon projects featured adult content of some kind (Follows 2017).

<sup>84</sup> Concerning this area specifically, my future research will endeavor to include more female voices and perspectives, particularly as platform-mediated work becomes standardized across all genres and communities of music-making labor.

It's a totally different frame of mind. To go from being a rock 'n' roll rebel to being a fundraiser...taking away that power that you have [as an artist] and showing [fans] what a normal person you are. Can that be equated with gender? It's definitely emasculating in terms of rock 'n' roll. It's just different. (I/Spires 2020)

In this assessment, the neo-patronage relation strips away the aura of rebelliousness and exceptionalism in rock recording artistry, revealing these rockers-cum-fundraisers to be “normal” people engaged in feminized, mundane retail and marketing work.

This gendered mode of valuation/devaluation destabilizes the “utopian potentiality” of popular musicianship (Toynbee 2000: 32). According to Toynbee, popular recording artists articulate what the “good life” might be for those with “exceptional faculties” and the wherewithal to act on them (Toynbee 2000: 31). They demonstrate “exemplary agency” in their capacity to “negotiate between...being ordinary, typically of the people, and being marvellous, showing what life could be like ‘if only’” ordinary people too could have and be rewarded for such talents (Toynbee 2000: x-xi). This perceived potential for transcendence of mundane social categories is part of what imbues popular recording artists with social power and cultural significance—a heavily masculinized power which Spires sees as threatened in the context of Patreon and its normalizing fundraising routines.

From another perspective, Tim Charles describes how the Patreon model reinforces a prevailing ambiguity regarding what constitutes amateur and/or professional music-making:

One thing that contributes to the backlash is that there are enormous amounts of amateur musicians in the world, of all sorts of levels, and there's no clear line [to cross that] changes someone from an amateur to a professional...there are a lot of people who are great musicians, who don't do music as a job. So there's this massive gray area. (I/Charles 2020)

In the digital music economy, the growing excess of options available for musicians to promote, interact and exchange with audiences effectively blurs the lines between amateurs and professionals. The metal music field becomes a “gray area” where prevailing markers of authenticity and or ‘selling out’ appear to lose their essential meaning. In this context, market-oriented “[a]ctivities at which artists may once have looked askance” become viable “strategies to break through the clutter of a million messages and nearly as many bands in order to reach a potential audience” (Klein et al 2016:13). Here, amateur musicians and unsigned artists interact and transact on the same online platforms as professional “signed” artists. The result is a differently stratified space of music-making production, where norms of professionalization—and the ‘rock values’ which police them—are challenged and/or upended in a growing field of platform-mediated promotional, financial and distributional opportunities.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

These recording artists’ perceptions reveal the extent to which Patreon remains a contested space in rock and metal recording artistry; its ideological fault lines are ill-defined, shifting and contingent, often revealed to subsist more in the judgments of participants than in any platform or market space. In contrast, the ideologies of Groce’s artists and entertainers clearly reflected the almost antinomic orientations and goals of two distinct camps. Moreover, both the nightclub and the Patreon platform represent indiscriminate mediators; neither is concerned with the ideological views of the musicians and audiences they bring together, but rather with making money from them.

Accordingly, Patreon stands among other platform-mediators who do not distinguish their users as professionals, amateurs or anything in between, but rather as ‘inputs’ in their rent-seeking apparatus.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This dissertation examined recording artists' ongoing struggle for creative and financial autonomy in contexts of the demise of the 20<sup>th</sup> century model of “getting signed” and the rise of online platform-mediated crowdfunding opportunities. Through the contextualized case study of Ne Obliviscaris and Patreon, the aim was to highlight the new tech business structures and the cultural tensions and contradictions which underlie these opportunities as recording artists negotiate more multifaceted, dependent and entrepreneurial engagements with technology companies. I argued that Patreon fundraisers enter into continuing relations of subordination, but do so paradoxically as autonomous, seemingly “empowered” entrepreneurial subjects. Consequently—and despite their apparent liberation from conventional institutions and power structures—the autonomy that heavy metal fundraisers attain in this relation has no intrinsic, emancipatory *political* value or meaning; it is a form of autonomy predicated on occupational individuation, rather than any substantial freedom from the obligations and constraints of capital accumulation. I suggested that Patreon perpetuates long-standing power disparities in the culture industries by concentrating the risks and duties of production, marketing and retailing more squarely upon its fundraisers.

Crowdfunding platforms like Patreon are rent-seeking apparatuses; they accumulate capital primarily from existing wealth derived from the ownership, control and exploitation of properties and assets (in contrast to surplus value extracted from productive labor). As owner of the means through which platform producers transact with consumers, the rentier company's project is to organize platform labor in ways which permit ongoing and increasing rent-extraction. In the case of Patreon, the company makes



money by mediating and charging fees on the financial transactions of networked users. Accordingly, Patreon fundraisers are not employees; rather, they are considered—and legally treated as—external, independent contractors who represent the aggregate productive inputs in this apparatus. In order to access the platform’s affordances, they internalize the logic of the platform and adapt themselves to the obligations of this new occupational dynamic.

Labor’s subordinate and vulnerable status in the platform relation can be traced to the broader “push” of neoliberal economic policies and practices. As outlined in Chapter 1, neoliberal institutions exercise a “political rationality” of governance, one that interprets “the production of all human and institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility” (Brown 2005 40). As a correlate of and support to rent-seeking interests of finance capital, neoliberal policies and practices establish structural conditions which “push” labor into more precarious platform-mediated work relations out of necessity (as for example, after the 2008 financial crisis) or as a new opportunity (as it was for YouTubers after Patreon was established). However, and for recording artists in particular, there is also an alluring “pull” to such “entrepreneurial action.” As creative individuals who seek audiences and ways to make money from them, entrepreneurial opportunities herald the promise of greater empowerment, self-reliance and autonomy. This is reinforced through entrepreneurial discourse eliciting artists to internalize market values and transform themselves into more enterprising subjects as acts of self-realization.

To be an entrepreneurial recording artist is to *make* things happen, as opposed to just *waiting* for things to happen (e.g. performing and touring and waiting for some

executive to show up offering a recording contract). In the logic of these developing narratives, autonomy is a defining, positive attribute of platform-mediated crowdfunding work—yet in becoming fundraisers, recording artists ironically take on more burdens, risk and responsibility. Like a pearl within an oyster, autonomy then becomes the “reward” which lies hidden beneath market imperatives—if one wishes to seize the opportunity and attain it. In the context of the neo-patronage relation, to be a “creator” is then perceived to be an autonomy-enhancing act, despite whatever dependent or contradictory positionings one must endure in the process.

The autonomy afforded by Patreon is two-sided. On one hand, it appears as a means of fan-funded financial freedom from established and increasingly inaccessible old fashioned institutions like record labels. On the other, it is also a distinctly *market-afforded* freedom; it is the freedom to be legally designated as an independent contractor and to accept a vulnerable, subordinate positioning in the relations of production. In other words, it is the autonomy to negotiate with a new set of corporate masters who control their access to audiences and income under the banner of a new notion of freedom. In this sense, the individual fundraiser is the architect of their own success or failure—an outcome which is always marketized and held external from the platform.

Platform companies like Patreon hold the more-passive seeming power of exclusion. Its autonomous users have no right or claim to the company’s services and affordances; they either tolerate the terms and conditions, or seek employment and income from other means. In this world, entrepreneurial autonomy is the freedom to market and retail oneself using the platform’s capacities and affordances; it is the freedom to subject oneself to the rules and imperatives of the market and the percentages claimed

by its monopolists. This type of autonomy is on full display in the neo-patronage relation where entrepreneurial logics are portrayed as axiomatic; if one wants to be successful (in terms of accruing and maintaining patrons and income), one should internalize and adopt more entrepreneurial practices, habits and comportments. On Patreon, autonomy is rearticulated as an attribute of self-actualization through market-oriented practices; a source of self-fulfillment rather than a constraint or obligation. In sum, these entrepreneurial propositions and elicitations have a didactic purpose: they are employed as a means of rationalizing, normalizing and *legitimizing* the neo-patronage relation.

I also examined how the terms and conditions of platform-mediated work establish new roles and practices that clash with long held notions of authenticity and ‘rock values’ in recording artistry. As outlined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, recording artists like Ne Obliviscaris seek out online crowdfunding opportunities for single projects, to make ends meet, or in their case, to help finance their career in an ongoing manner. However, as the backlash encountered by that band reveals, patronage-based crowdfunding remains controversial and fraught with ideological tension. Long-held values which define and condemn ‘selling out’ are drawn to the surface as the legitimacy of crowdfunding practices undergo evaluation. As findings in Chapter 4 reveal, recording artists engage Patreon’s opportunities and obligations with varying degrees of enthusiasm, dependence, reluctance and/or pragmatism. In describing their work, they employed rhetoric to legitimize their relations with Patreon as an “acceptable” commercial affiliation in light of diminishing and/or stagnant revenue streams from both old (e.g. record sales) and new (e.g. streaming) economic models. In the case of the neo-patronage relation, these enduring ‘rock values’ still determine how some artists (e.g.

Allegaeon) negotiate and rationalize these platform relations. For others (e.g. Ne Obliviscaris), they represent the old values of a past regime and have little sway over their choices; they are willing to bend and adjust their roles and practices in order to access new financial opportunities, whatever the terms and conditions.

In light of these findings, I argued that online crowdfunding remains a contested practice as recording artists negotiate and reconcile their fundraising status with late-20<sup>th</sup> century, dues-paying, masculinist ‘rock values.’ The cultural and ideological heft of these values poses a problem for heavy metal recording artists who struggle to legitimate their participation in more entrepreneurial endeavors (such as those afforded by Patreon). I suggested that recording artists’ ideological views concerning these values represent fault lines which bend and shift in response to changing production relations and are emphasized whenever recording artists make choices regarding “good” and “bad” ways of making money. In the context of the now-dominant presence of platform mediated-relations, these fault lines are in constant flux. What are considered legitimate and acceptable market practices appear to change according to context, circumstance and degree (and often according to how much an individual artist may wish to test the limits).

In light of this, further research should account for how understandings and markers of authenticity and legitimation might also change, diminish or lose relevance when contrasted with the contemporary financial realities of recording artists. As younger generations enter these same fields and occupational relations, there will be a need to assess whether aspiring artists who have grown up using online platforms—and internalized their logic—may already be well-accustomed to the necessity of developing a mediated, branded and/or promotional selfhood. Accordingly, entrepreneurial

obligations, duties and roles would then become a dominant attribute of recording artistry to the extent that “old” ideological tensions may be washed over and/or marginalized.

Continuing research might also consider how platform-mediated opportunities are interpreted and/or experienced in other ways by different nationalities, gender and ethnic groups, as well as in other genres, fields and scenes of music and cultural production (Hair, 2021; D’Amato and Cassella 2020; Vallas and Schor 2020; Shor et al 2020). Moreover, Patreon is but one example of an emerging legion of technology companies that now preside as powerful mediators, not just in the music and culture industries but across all areas of social and economic activity. Accordingly, they have the capacity to establish the standards and practices according to which billions of individual users might network and transact with one another. The findings and implications of this dissertation therefore transcend the music industries to inform scholarly research in the wider fields of media and culture studies, as well as any investigation into the politics of work in post-industrial capitalism. In particular, it speaks to current debates on the status of labor in the “gig” economy (Page-Tickell & Yerby 2020; Larsson & Teigland 2020), the dynamics of crowdfunding culture (Shneor et al 2020) and the evolving “platform power” of technology companies in mediating producer-consumer relations (Pepper & Thelen 2020).

As an artist who developed and built their audience in the context of the digital music economy, Ne Obliviscaris appear to represent a clear test-case for a new model, entrepreneurial recording artist in rock and metal music-making. To them, Patreon represented an opportunity which fit the type of economic relations they were seeking with their audience. They were early adoptors who in many ways set a standard for online

crowdfunding comportment, strategies and practices. As ideal neoliberal subjects, their democratic, transparent and ethical claims in defense of the neo-patronage relation highlight their ideological investment in the model. The extent to which they represent an archetypical, neoliberal-molded type of platform worker then presents issues for further investigation. Specifically, and in light of these entrepreneurial pressures, how might online platform-mediated work be rendered more just, ethical and fair for recording artists? The rock values still saturating much heavy metal practice were the product of a 20<sup>th</sup> century accumulation regime; those values glorified rock performers' engagement with massive conglomerates. Will the values of contemporary heavy metal performers re-congeal such that they can glorify the platform?

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**Interviews (I/...)**

I/Charles, Tim 2020. Ne Obliviscaris band member and band manager. Interview by author. Helsinki, Finland. June 10.

I/McShane, Riley 2020. Allegaeon band member. Interview by author. Helsinki, Finland. June 11.

I/Spires, Creston 2020. Harvey Milk band member and singer/songwriter. Interview by author. Helsinki, Finland. June 9.

## **Appendices**

## Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear [name of interview participant]:

We have received your email address from \_\_\_\_\_. You are being invited to participate in a study that we, Prof. Matt Stahl and PhD student Jason Netherton are conducting. Briefly, the study is an examination of how new online funding services and platforms (e.g. Patreon and Indiegogo) are altering the traditional relations among record labels, recording artists and their audiences. To tackle this topic, we are interviewing recording artists and/or related music industries representatives in order to gain insight into how recording artists are engaging and adapting to more ‘entrepreneurial’ work practices. We would like to invite you to take part in this project, which is intended to contribute to a better understanding of how recording artists might effectively sustain a career in the evolving digital music economy.

Participation in this research involves a 30-minute interview. We understand that your time is valuable and we are willing and able to accommodate your schedule. The research will take place between \_\_\_\_\_. Scheduling adjustments can be made in order to meet with you face-to-face, by phone or by Skype. If you agree to the interview, please know that your participation remains entirely voluntary throughout the whole process, and that there is no compensation.

Furthermore, the interview results and your identity will be kept confidential, unless you offer written permission to disclose your identity. More information is included on the attached Letter of Information and Consent, and we can also be reached using the contact information below. We are excited at the prospect of having you involved with this research and it is our hope that you are willing to participate.

Thank you,

Jason Netherton, PhD Candidate, The University of Western Ontario

Prof. Matt Stahl, The University of Western Ontario

## **Appendix B: Letter of Information and Consent**

**STUDY TITLE:** Recording Artistry and the Entrepreneurial Imperative

**Student Researcher:**

Jason Netherton, Media Studies Ph.D. Candidate  
University of Western Ontario

**Supervisor:**

Dr. Matt Stahl, Associate Professor  
University of Western Ontario

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**What is this study about?**

I am a doctoral student interested in your views concerning the status of recording artists working in the digital music economy. More specifically, we are seeking to better understand how recording artists are experimenting with, using and experiencing new online platforms, applications and services in order to fund, promote and distribute their music. To tackle this topic, we are interviewing recording artists and/or related music industries representatives in order to gain insight into how recording artists are engaging and adapting to more ‘entrepreneurial’ work practices in the digital music economy. Your experiences and opinions will provide valuable insight, helping this project to generate new and up-to-date knowledge about how recording artists are navigating current changes in the digital music economy.

If you agree to participate, this study will require a single interview that should last no longer than 30 minutes. You will be asked questions about your experiences and views concerning the economic and social dimensions of recording, promoting, and circulating music. The questions will be open-ended and conversational in tone, and can take place in a face-to-face setting of your choosing, through Skype or over the phone.

**Possible Risks and Harms**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study. However, if at any time the subject matter or direction of the conversation makes you feel uncomfortable, we can cease the interview. You also have the right to request that all information collected be withdrawn. If you wish to have your information removed, you can inform the researcher at any time.

**Is my participation voluntary?**

Yes, your participation in this study is voluntary. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form.

**What will happen to my responses?**

If you consent, our interview will be audio-recorded, and then transcribed into print, which will then be used in this research. You may also participate if you would prefer not to be audio-recorded. In this case the researcher will take written notes during the interview to use in this research. Both the audio recordings and/or written notes will then be secured and accessible only to the researchers, and then permanently deleted/destroyed approximately five years after the study.

**Confidentiality of the study**

As a participant, all answers are voluntary and you are free to disclose information to the extent that you are comfortable, with the promise of confidentiality should you so desire. If you wish for your name and answers to remain confidential, all information that could identify you will be removed from the data, and pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity. A master list linking your study number with your name will then be kept by the researcher in a secure place, separate from your study file. The researcher will keep any personal information about you in a secure and confidential location and will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. All personal information collected will remain confidential and will be accessible only to the researchers. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

With your permission, the use of direct quotes from interviews may be published in papers, books, or presented at conferences or used in teaching materials. If you are interested, you may request copies of the interview transcripts as well as copies of any future possible publications. While we do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project which may be required to be reported by law, we have a duty to report.

**Will I be compensated for my participation?**

There is no financial compensation for participation.

If you have any questions or require clarification on any aspect of this study, please contact the student researcher:

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What do you think about the term “creator” as Patreon uses it? Are all Patreon users “creators” as you understand the term?
2. Do you approach your Patreon endeavor as a business?
3. Musicians have always had to hustle – some people say that musicians have always had to be entrepreneurs – what’s your feeling about this word entrepreneur? What does it mean to you?
4. Why do you think more recording artists have not signed up to Patreon?
5. How do you see Patreon’s appeal to newer artists? How do the situations of new artists contemplating Patreon seem to you? What kind of difficulties do they face? What advice would you give them?
6. Do you think there is something about rock music (and the metal scene and genre in particular), which is somewhat resistant to new ideas about making money?
7. Do you think there’s such a thing as “rock values” or if rock musicians have or should have some kind of common purpose or solidarity?
8. Do you ever feel responsible to produce for your patrons?
9. How do patrons’ expectations seem to you? How has Patreon changed fans’ expectations? How does this feel to you? Has your orientation to audiences/fans changed?
10. Have you ever found it difficult to meet their expectations, or provide them with ongoing ‘perks’ for example?
11. Has there ever been a moment when you felt your creative work was in some way compromised, hindered or limited by your Patreon duties?
12. How have Patreon’s system or Patreon’s expectations affected your music-making?
13. Why do you publish your income figures? Why do others not publish them? why is this important?
14. (For Tim Charles) Is making a minimum wage through Patreon still a primary goal? Where are you and the band at with respect to the minimum wage goals you started with?
15. Do you feel that Patreon has made you less dependent on your record label?



16. How important is it to you to either maintain existing patrons, or to keep your patron base growing? Is there any pressure to do either?
17. Do you think Patreon's fee structure works well based on your needs? Would you be willing to try some of the more advanced service-oriented tiers they now offer?
18. Would you consider the Patreon model to be a meritocracy?
19. What's your definition of success as a recording artist? How has your definition changed? How has Patreon changed the terms of success in general? Do artists have a better chance at success in this system than in the 1990s?
20. In your view, how necessary are entrepreneurial skills for Patreon success? Could one be introverted and/or averse to self-promotion and still succeed on the platform?
21. How essential is Patreon to your overall work and income?
22. What do you think it would be like for you tomorrow if Patreon disappeared tonight – through some corporate takeover or all the servers exploded or whatever?
23. Have you ever had any problem or issue with Patreon's terms and conditions? Have you ever felt limited by them?
24. Have you encountered any flaws in Patreon's model, or things it could do better for recording artists? What would you change about Patreon if they put you in charge of it?
25. Looking back, would you do anything different about how you handled your Patreon campaign?

## Appendix D: Ethics Approval and Renewal



Research Ethics

### Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Matt Stahl

Department &amp; Institution: Information and Media Studies, Western University

NMREB File Number: 108467

Study Title: The Entrepreneurial Imperative: Recording Artists in Extreme Metal Music Proto-Markets

NMREB Initial Approval Date: August 30, 2017

NMREB Expiry Date: August 30, 2018

## Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

| Document Name                   | Comments                         | Version Date |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|
| Western University Protocol     |                                  | 2017/07/21   |
| Recruitment Items               | Recruitment Letter               | 2017/07/21   |
| Letter of Information & Consent |                                  | 2017/07/21   |
| Other                           | Verbal Consent Form              | 2017/07/21   |
| Instruments                     | Interview Schedule and Questions | 2017/07/21   |

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

  
Ethics Officer, on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair or delegated board member

EO: Erika Basile \_\_ Grace Kelly \_\_ Katelyn Harris  Nichol Mephet \_\_ Karen Gopal \_\_ Patricia Sargeant \_\_ Kelly Patterson \_\_





**Date:** 1 August 2018

**To:** Dr. Matt Stahl

**Project ID:** 108467

**Study Title:** The Entrepreneurial Imperative: Recording Artists in Extreme Metal Music Proto-Markets

**Application Type:** Continuing Ethics Review (CER) Form

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Meeting Date:** 07/Sept/2018

**Date Approval Issued:** 01/Aug/2018

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 30/Aug/2019

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Dear Dr. Matt Stahl,

The Western University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the application. This study, including all currently approved documents, has been re-approved until the expiry date noted above.

REB members involved in the research project do not participate in the review, discussion or decision.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Daniel Wyzynski, Research Ethics Coordinator, on behalf of Prof. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*



**Date:** 29 August 2019

**To:** Dr. Matt Stahl

**Project ID:** 108467

**Study Title:** The Entrepreneurial Imperative: Recording Artists in Extreme Metal Music Proto-Markets

**Application Type:** Continuing Ethics Review (CER) Form

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Meeting Date:** 06/Sep/2019

**Date Approval Issued:** 29/Aug/2019

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 30/Aug/2020

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Dear Dr. Matt Stahl,

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board has reviewed this application. This study, including all currently approved documents, has been re-approved until the expiry date noted above.

REB members involved in the research project do not participate in the review, discussion or decision.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Daniel Wyzynski, Research Ethics Coordinator, on behalf of Prof. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*