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Rock of our salvation: ideological production at the Christian youth music festival

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}
Christian youth music festivals (CYMFs) are an important niche sector in the realm of large-scale leisure events. In line with the recent turn towards exploring festivals and events as spaces of cultural production and articulation, this compressed time ethnographic study analyses two very different Protestant CYMFs – one of which is affiliated with conservative Christianity and one of which is affiliated with counterculture Christianity – and investigates the way these leisure spaces function as sites where ideologies are produced and religious identities constructed. It concludes that, despite the festivals’ differences in ideological orientation, both events draw on the mechanisms of leveraged liminality, embodied performativity, and youthful impressionability to advance their respective ends. The paper thus seeks to highlight the ideological importance of leisure event management.

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Ideology; identity; festivals and events; religion; music

\textbf{Introduction}
Until the event’s closing in 2012, thousands of young people (and a few aging hippies) from across North America gathered each year in the cornfields of central Illinois to spend the better part of a week camping, socializing, worshipping, and immersing themselves in music at what was arguably America’s most famous Christian rock gathering: the Cornerstone Festival. Although Cornerstone was one of the most historic of the type of gatherings that have come to be known collectively as Christian youth music festivals (CYMFs), it is far from being the only noteworthy example. Indeed, over two dozen such gatherings now occur annually, attracting tens of thousands of participants (Howard and Streck 1999; Johnston 2011), and thus rendering CYMFs a notable niche sector in the realm of festivals and events (Tkaczynski 2013).

CYMFs, however, have an importance that goes well beyond the sheer number of participants involved or the economic impacts they produce by attracting both locals and tourists. They are spaces in which different forms of Christianity and Christian identity are constructed and negotiated. Given the significant role of Christianity in U.S. politics,
and in turn the effects of U.S. politics on the world stage, CYMFs, as sites of ideological production and identity development, deserve attention in the leisure literature. Such an exploration also has resonance in a context of broader contemporary concerns about the role religious leisure and tourism practices can play in promoting either increased tolerance and cross-cultural harmony or increased factionalism and divisiveness in a world rife with religious and ethnic conflict (Moufakkir and Kelly 2010).

This study draws on the first author’s fieldwork at two large Protestant CYMFs, Cornerstone and Lifest (pronounced ‘life fest’), to begin to understand how such festivals help to advance particular constructions of Christianity. While the broader political consequences of the ideologies advanced by these festivals are explored in another manuscript derived from this project (Caton et al. 2013), in this paper we take an ethnographic approach in order to focus on providing a close reading of the management practices that lead to such ideological production (and reproduction) and its attendant political implications. In so doing, we seek to answer Getz’s (2008) call for further development of the literature on festivals and events as phenomena of sociocultural importance, rather than merely as economic impact generators. Similarly, in line with the current movement to more actively contextualize and analyse events against the broader cultural and political backdrop of which they are a part, as illustrated by Annals of Leisure Research’s recent special issue on events and legacies (McGillivray, McPherson, and Carnicelli 2015), we wish through this paper to deepen the leisure literature’s engagement with events beyond what have traditionally been its more individualistic concerns – such as participant motivation (Filo, Funk, and O’Brien 2011; Tkaczynski and Rundle-Thiele 2013) and satisfaction (Madrigal 1995; Hultsman 1998; Laverie and Arnett 2000), psychological dimensions of spectatorship (Madrigal 1995, 2003, 2006), and explorations of participant behaviour (Wakefield and Wann 2006; Derom and Taks 2011) – and move into the realm of the social.

We begin by contextualizing the study in the literature on the history of festivals and events as vehicles for ideological production, as CYMFs are certainly not unique in this regard. Next, we attempt to situate the CYMF within the history of American theo-politics, exploring the historical role para-church leisure activities have served in consolidating particular imaginaries of Christianity. We then turn to the present empirical study, summarizing the primary research that was undertaken and the conclusions drawn. Ultimately, we posit that CYMFs aid in the advancement of particular constructions of Christianity in three ways. The first is through the use of what we have termed ‘leveraged liminality’, a situation in which festival organizers are aware of the CYMF’s ability to serve as a ‘space apart’ in the minds of participants and choose intentionally to leverage this sensation and marshal it in carefully controlled ways to promote particular outcomes. The second considers the experiential intensity of CYMFs, in terms of the way they are organized to engage the body and emotions in a ritual performance that produces powerful responses from participants. The third draws on theories of identity development to discuss CYMF organizers’ penchant for engaging participants at the most impressionable stage on their path towards identity formation: youth. Finally, we conclude by noting the importance of devoting continued scholarly attention to the formation and negotiation of Christian imaginaries and identities in contemporary leisure and tourism contexts, given the intense and consequential imbrication of fundamentalist Christianity with neo-conservative politics in twenty-first-century America. The paper thus seeks to highlight the role leisure event management practice plays in rendering events not only economically...
imported for communities or psychologically important for participants, but also ideologically and politically consequential for society more broadly.

**Ideological production at CYMFs**

From a participant’s point of view, a festival is a leisure activity – a chance to spend time with family or friends, to celebrate a cultural legacy, to experience entertainment themed to one’s hobbies or interests, or simply to be immersed in a spectacle. From a cultural studies perspective, however, festivals are far more than just fun and games. From the earliest days of western civilization, special events like the Greek Olympics and Roman circuses served powerful ideological purposes, reaching well beyond their simple entertainment value. Although the literature on events tends to focus predominantly on economic concerns (Getz 2008), social analysis in this domain has been on the rise across various disciplines in recent decades – especially in cultural studies, which views festivals as ‘texts’ with semiotics that can be read for meaning.

Perhaps the most famous example of the analysis of event-as-cultural-text is Bakhtin’s (1984) exploration of the Renaissance carnival as a space of social inversion. Others have also deconstructed Renaissance events and spectacles – for example, Mullaney’s (1983) analysis of the city of Rouen’s 1550 ‘re-creation’ of a Brazilian village, in which a host of indigenous people were imported to play the part of villagers, who viewers could gaze upon or interact with – to consider what they reveal about Renaissance subjects’ understandings of self, other, and the very definition of culture. More modern events have also received much attention with regard to the study of ‘pleasure-politics’ (Sharpe 2008), as illustrated, for example, by the plethora of analyses concerning beauty pageants (e.g. Banet-Weiser 1999), the modern Olympic Games (e.g. Xu 2006), and other global sporting events (e.g. Tomlinson and Young 2006) as discursive spaces of national identity construction and the politics of multiculturalism. Scholars of cultural politics have also explored festivals as contested spaces, in which different groups vie to articulate local and national culture to tourists and locals in terms favourable to their own goals and position (e.g. Cohen 1998; Davila 1997; Eyerman 2002; Jeong and Santos 2004). It is against this backdrop of festivals as spaces of ideological production that our interest in CYMFs emerges.

In taking up an exploration of CYMFs from a cultural studies perspective, it first becomes obvious how surprisingly little has been said about the relationship between religion and leisure more generally. Religion influences contemporary society profoundly (Weber 1930; Marsden 2006), and yet, aside from its notation as a vector of ‘diversity’ in textbooks on leisure behaviour, mention of it is rare within the leisure studies literature (Stodolska and Livengood 2006). Decades ago, Kelly (1987) outlined three ways in which leisure and religion might be related: first, that religious activities are typically done in one’s free time; second, that particular popular leisure activities may be viewed unfavourably by religious groups as running counter to their values; and third, that some leisure activities may support people’s religious lives and enhance their spiritual development. Livengood (2009) empirically explored some aspects of Kelly’s (1987) conceptualizations in her work with New Paradigm Christians in the Midwestern U.S., and ultimately concluded that, at least for this demographic, leisure activities do indeed represent an important wellspring of spiritual experience – an interpretation which falls in line with the outcomes of several earlier studies by Heintzman and colleagues (e.g. Heintzman 2000;
Heintzman and Mannell (2003) on leisure as an important source of spiritual wellbeing across faith traditions.

While the leisure studies literature has tended to take a more individualistic, human-centred approach to the relationship between religion and leisure, the disciplines of history and religious studies have been keener to explore leisure’s social and political functions in religious contexts. A handful of thoughtful treatments of the historical role of leisure in American Christian history have emerged over the past two decades that cast doubt on the stereotypes of the puritan ‘killjoy’ (Daniels 1995, 3) and his supposedly all-work-and-no-play evangelical descendants (Messenger 2000), offering instead a more complex picture of the ways that leisure practices have sustained religious communities, values, and commitments over the course of American history. In particular, recent scholarship has addressed the importance of leisure, entertainment, and tourism in maintaining contemporary American evangelical Christianity’s rich separatist subculture – a sociocultural life support system that nurtures evangelical faith against the backdrop of a mainstream secular society viewed as bereft of, and threatening to, conservative Christian values (Carpenter 1997; Marsden 2006; Balmer 2010).

This subculture was consolidated in the aftermath of major social changes in U.S. society in the nineteenth century, including the Civil War and rapid urbanization and immigration. Up to that point, evangelicals had largely embraced a doctrine of ‘postmillennialism’, or the belief that Jesus would return to earth after a 1000-year golden age of peace and prosperity. Thus, evangelicals were leading social reformers, championing progressive causes in order to bring the kingdom of heaven into being on earth and usher in this golden age (Balmer 2006). Demoralized as the national agony of the Civil War dragged on, contrary to evangelicals’ expectations that victory would be quick because of the obvious moral superiority of their abolitionist position, and feeling their grip on society slipping away in the face of mounting urban problems and demographic shifts that delivered increasing waves of ‘outsiders’ (most notably Catholics and Jews, who were none too keen to embrace evangelicals’ prohibitionist principles), evangelicals were increasingly swayed to ‘pre-millennialist’ thinking, or the belief that Jesus would return to earth before the 1000-year kingdom was established (Balmer 2010). This eschatology – or theory of the ‘end times’ – effectively absolved evangelicals of any duty to work for social improvement. Things were bound only to get worse until Jesus would return to redeem the earth, and so the best path was to turn inward and cultivate one’s own relationship with God in preparation for the second coming (Balmer 2010).

Evangelicals did just this, building a strong subculture that nurtured their faith and provided protection from the mainstream society with which they increasingly felt at odds. Their distrust of popular culture, however, did not prevent them from drawing on its rhetorical forms to engage followers, especially youth. Evangelical preaching had long had a theatrical element to it, and as the times changed, church leaders were not hesitant to employ new technologies, such as radio, television, and the Internet, to promote their message (Erickson 1992; Cobb 1998). Christian popular music (along with other entertainment products like films and novels) arose to provide both a way of connecting with youth that was more engaging than the typical Sunday sermon and a way of replacing leisure elements of modern adolescent life with parallel ‘Christian versions’ that would give youth a sense of experiencing a ‘normal teenage life’ without threatening their religious identities (Reid 1993).
Music featuring Christian themes was not always cordoned off as its own genre. In the 1950s, it was common for popular artists, such as Elvis Presley, to record songs with religious lyrics, but in the aftermath of the cultural and artistic turmoil produced by the 1960s, embracing overtly Christian themes in lyricism became almost antithetical to garnering rock-and-roll credibility (Thompson 2000). There were, of course, exceptions to this rule, such as the Byrds’ 1965 hit cover of Pete Seeger’s ‘Turn, Turn, Turn’, with its lyrics taken from Ecclesiastes, or U2’s ‘40’, with lyrics taken from Psalm 40. But for the most part, artists who wished to express Christian themes in their lyrics found themselves increasingly shut out of the mainstream music scene. The contemporary Christian music (CCM) industry quickly arose to fill this gap, but the social and material construction of this new genre was as loaded with internal politics as rock-and-roll and pop had been, with CCM labels refusing to carry artists whose lyrics were not ‘Christian enough’, as this would not guarantee play on Christian radio stations, just as mainstream labels were rejecting the same artists for featuring Christianity in their lyrics at all, perceiving that any music which could be read as proselytizing or devotional would alienate mainstream radio listeners. Thus, many Christian artists found themselves stuck between the two worlds of CCM and mainstream music, unable to gain footing in either market (Dueck 2000; Thompson 2000).

Against this backdrop of music politics rose Christian concerts and music festivals. Some such festivals saw it as their mission to provide a space for Christian artists who found themselves caught between, and rejected by, the CCM and mainstream rock and pop industries. Others saw themselves as a logical extension of the CCM genre, providing a separatist space for fans to have a leisure experience that supported their pursuit of a Christian lifestyle. In any case, CYMFs quickly became a linchpin of Christian youth subculture (Stowe 2011). Perhaps best characterized as expressions of New Paradigm Christianity (Livengood 2009), CYMFs (whether conservative or countercultural) are less invested in supporting particular theological positions than they are in providing pan-denominational spaces where Protestant Christianity can be made attractive to potential new followers, as well as rendered continuously meaningful and powerful for established members of the faith, through both the fun and the serious emotionality of music as a leisure practice.

From our own perspective, then, as cultural studies researchers, we seek through this project to extend the work of leisure scholars in exploring meanings of religious leisure practices in people’s lives, and also to extend the work of social historians in considering in ethnographic detail yet another important context in which leisure practices serve ideological functions within a faith tradition – that of the Christian music festival scene. We see the aim of this work as predominantly anthropological – to unpack, through close attention to the structure and lived experiences of CYMFs, the details of how these events come to life and are able to do the different kinds of ideological work that they do in the faith communities they articulate with.

**Methods**

Little work exists on CYMFs, so an inductive and exploratory approach was taken in analyzing Lifest and Cornerstone, rooted methodologically in what has been referred to in the qualitative methods literature variously as mini-, micro-, or compressed time–ethnography (Jeffrey and Troman 2004; Hammersley 2006). This approach stems from the anthropological tradition of ethnography, which emphasizes participant-observation and a holistic
approach to the gathering and analysis of a wide range of data, from direct field observations, to experiential understandings, to formal and informal interviews, to relevant documents pertaining to the field site. Compressed time–ethnography differs from traditional ethnography, however, in its length of engagement in the field, wherein the researcher undertakes participant-observation during concentrated time periods that are particularly relevant for gaining an understanding of the group or phenomenon in question.

Compressed time–ethnography has obvious limitations, in that it does not allow for the researcher to build long-term relationships with participants or to view each of their lives in its full context, but it can be appropriate in certain situations where traditional ethnography is not possible. In the case of this project, which involves a subculture of participants who are geographically diffuse and who only gather for brief but intense periods (i.e. during a given CYMF), the compressed time–ethnographic approach allowed the lead researcher to reap some of the benefits of traditional ethnography, in the sense of being able to immerse herself in the phenomenon, to understand it from an experiential point of view, and (in some instances) to bond with participants on the level in which they tended ordinarily to bond with each other in the liminal context of the festival. These brief periods of intense participant-observation were then supported by a broader and longer term engagement with the phenomenon through formal interviews with festival organizers outside the timeframe of festival operations, analysis of documents pertinent to the festivals studied, and secondary research regarding the larger context of the Christian music subculture and Christian youth movements.

The fieldwork was conducted by the first author between 2010 and 2012 and was anchored by participant-observation in the summer of 2011 at two important CYMFs in the U.S.: Lifest and the Cornerstone Festival. The researcher spent a total of 11 days attending the two festivals, camping onsite, unobtrusively observing attendees, participating in various aspects of each event, and conducting more than 30 informal interviews, ranging in length from 15 minutes to two hours, with attendees, performers, staff, and volunteers. Observations and casual interviews took place at campsites, music performances, retail markets, exhibitions, activities, and seminars at each festival site. Participating in the same activities as the other attendees and being part of the same age demographic as many of them facilitated a sense of trust and rapport, although all participants were made aware that the researcher was attending the festival for research purposes as well as to participate in the celebration of Christian music, and that her goal was to better understand the phenomenon of CYMFs and the experiences of attendees and performers there.

Interviews with festival organizers were more formal and lasted between one and two hours. In these interviews, the researcher sought to gain an understanding of each festival’s history and of its organizers’ purpose in producing their respective event. The researcher also sought the organizers’ perceptions regarding the effects of their festival on attendees and the festival’s relationship to popular youth culture at large. Finally, consideration was given to textual materials, including the official websites of each festival and the organization behind it, event programmes, educational leaflets, and advertisements found on site at the festivals, and web discussion boards for Christian music enthusiasts.

Having introduced the study’s approach, we now move on to provide brief descriptions of Lifest and Cornerstone, and to explore the ways these two festivals, though quite
unalike in their ideological leanings, nevertheless function in similar ways as sites of Christian identity production and as spaces in which particular notions of Christianity are constructed, negotiated, and contested. To leave more space for analysis, our characterizations of the festivals are brief, and readers are referred to Caton et al. (2013) for fuller portraits. Before moving on to discuss the study’s outcomes, however, we would be remiss if we did not provide at least a brief mention of our own positionality with regard to the CYMF phenomenon.

As a research team, we hail from a variety of religious and national backgrounds. Three of the authors (including the field researcher) had considerable experience with Christian youth subculture during adolescence. The other two came to an interest in this phenomenon from a more strictly academic perspective: one has considerable background in the festival and events industry, having worked as manager and promoter in the music industry for 15 years before turning to academia, and the other has a deep scholarly interest in the theo-political aspects of Christian pilgrimage, a significant niche tourism sector in his home nation of Israel. Thus, a motley group of agnostics, Jews, and Christians in various states of connection to our respective religious traditions, we are united by our interest in the sociocultural role of festivals and of religious leisure in contemporary western culture, and we share, despite our diverse heritages, both a respect for Christianity as one of the world’s major religious traditions and a source of deep meaning in the lives of many people, and a critical stance towards particular forms of Christian ideology that we view as divisive and unloving.

As scholars, we are each drawn to the research traditions of hermeneutics and critical theory, with their attendant ontological and epistemological orientations (Lincoln and Guba 2003), and these approaches allow us to seek an understanding of the meaning of CYMFs in the lives of those who participate in them, as well as to simultaneously question how these events may function to serve particular political ends as they help to constitute and consolidate different ways of being Christian in the contemporary moment. In line with philosophical hermeneutic thinking (Gadamer 1975; Caton 2013), we did not approach the interpretation of these events as a data analysis task driven by a predefined procedure, but rather reflected on the first author’s fieldnotes, using them to generate conversation which spiraled among the authors. Our conversation congealed around comparing and contrasting the two festivals, as we were at once struck by both their strong similarities and differences. This comparison and contrasting became the framework for our analysis, and it led us to the insight that common event management mechanisms underlie the production and reproduction of very different ideological content at CYMFs. We turn shortly to those interpretations, but first offer a brief sketch of each festival considered in this project.

**Lifest**

Lifest, in place as a music festival since 1999, occurs each July at a community exhibition grounds in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. A five-day event, the festival attracts about 16,000 attendees on any given day, some of whom camp onsite and some of whom drive in for the day. Most participants are under the age of 18, and they typically attend with their parents or a church youth group (a common demographic and behaviour pattern at CYMFs – see Tkaczynski 2013). Attendees come from near and far; the researcher counted licence plates
from 30 U.S. states and several Canadian provinces on the festival premises. Slogans for the festival include ‘Party with a Purpose’, ‘More than Music’, and ‘Where Kids Have the Time of Their Life without Hiding from Their Parents’ (Lifest 2012). The 2011 Lifest event, at which fieldwork was conducted, featured live Christian music acts, comedians, and speakers on multiple stages, as well as seminars and workshops for youth pastors, leaders, and general attendees.

Lifest is run by Life Promotions, a nonprofit organization that produces faith-based programmes and events for churches and value-based programmes for U.S. public schools, and emphasizes the need to reach youth before the age of 18 through a focus on intervention and education to encourage positive life decision-making (Life Promotions 2012). Programme topics include abstinence, cults, domestic discord, alcohol, pornography, drug abuse, and so forth (Life Promotions 2012). Ideologically, Lifest is characterized by its affiliation with what has alternatively been termed conservative, evangelical, or fundamentalist Christianity. Affiliates of this faith follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, who they hold to be the son of God and the messiah, who has been sent by God to redeem the world from sin and evil. They are differentiated from some branches of Christianity by their view that the Bible is the literal, complete, and unerring word of God, which is provided as a guide for how human beings should live their lives; by their belief that Christians bear a responsibility to proselytize; and by their belief that acceptance of Jesus as the messiah is the only path to salvation. Conservative Christianity also tends to be characterized by its promotion of traditional social values, which are often viewed by its members as being under attack by mainstream culture. As is typical of New Paradigm Christianity (Livengood 2009), Lifest is overtly nondenominational and can be better understood as a social force driven by a particular set of values, nested broadly within a conservative Christian ontology, than as an organization driven by the kinds of detailed theological commitments that ground traditional Protestant denominations.

Essentially, Lifest exists to convert young people to Christianity, to help those who already identify as Christian to strengthen their faith and their ties to the Church, and to provide a space in which Christian youth can experience elements akin to mainstream popular culture that they will find attractive (e.g. loud music, edgy fashion) but in a protective setting in which the ideological messages of these elements are tightly controlled. It is hoped that by drawing on elements akin to popular culture, the festival organizers will be able to communicate with youth in ‘a language they understand’, in order to deliver what is ultimately an evangelical message, as well as other secondary messages about a safe and healthy way to live their lives according to conservative Christian principles.

Cornerstone

The Cornerstone Festival has a long pedigree, dating back over a quarter of a century to 1984, when it was founded by the Jesus People USA movement (or JPUSA, pronounced ‘japooza’), a counterculture Christian group which sprung from the hippie movements of the 1960s. Jesus People movements were commonly found throughout the U.S. in this era, but they declined with the general collapse of the hippie subculture, and JPUSA currently refers specifically to a particular group descended from this legacy, which remains active near Chicago, living communally and sharing all goods and property.
It is this group that organized the Cornerstone Festival for 29 years until the event officially came to an end in 2012.

Cornerstone occurred near Bushnell, Illinois, for six days each summer, with most attendees camping onsite and spending their days taking in music acts, seminars, art exhibits, and workshops. The festival attracted predominantly young people (although an older demographic than Lifest, 16–30 on average, a segment still in the typical range of what is common at other CYMFs (Tkaczynski 2013)), but there was also a significant component of older attendees who returned to the festival year after year, and this group was especially prevalent in 2011, as the organizers pushed for a ‘reunion’ theme in an attempt to shore up declining participation numbers, with festival attendance having fallen from a height of 20,000 participants to fewer than 10,000 in recent years. Like Lifest, Cornerstone drew event tourists from a wide geographic area. Again, license plates from most U.S. states were observed in 2011, and a significant Canadian contingent managed to find one another to create an impromptu celebration of Canada Day. Also like Lifest, Cornerstone was not rooted within a particular denominational tradition (or even confined to Protestantism in its influences), and attempting to locate JPUSA within the landscape of American Christianity has led to nothing short of a book-length ethnographic study in its own right (Young 2015).

Counterculture values were core to Cornerstone. The festival functioned to counter both the mainstream world’s values of materialism and intense individualism and the socially conservative values espoused by fundamentalist Christianity – especially the notion that hard rock and metal musical genres are sinful. Indeed, the history of JPUSA is one of individuals ‘united in a general distrust not only of secular society but also of mainstream religious institutions’ (Johnston 2011, citing Di Sabatino 1999). Despite this stance, JPUSA characterizes itself as aiming to work with other, more institutionalized churches and organizations, while simultaneously describing itself as a haven for a dropout, rejected generation (Trott 2005).

JPUSA has garnered criticism, and sometimes even ridicule, from wider Christian and secular circles for being too radical in its pursuit of communal living and too avant garde in its artistic sensibilities (Trott 2005), but this has not stopped the group from continuing to articulate its own notion of Christianity, which is purposely resistant to more entrenched expressions of Christian doctrine and practice. The group draws on Christian scripture to emphasize values of creativity, distrust of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, freedom, pleasure, direct and honest contact among persons, and the need to discard restrictions and inhibitions. JPUSA rejects the mainstream imaginary of Jesus as ‘a slow-moving, gentle, cryptic, and painstakingly polite rabbi’. It substitutes instead the characterization of a ruffian rebel who spoke truth to power and advocated for radical inclusiveness and anti-materialism, and it ultimately builds to the conclusion that ‘Jesus and rock music are perfectly suited to each other’ (Thompson 2000).

In 2012, Cornerstone closed its gates for the last time, with organizers citing the festival’s inability to maintain financial viability in a poor economy. Given that most attendees travelled to the festival by car, often across very long distances, it is perhaps not surprising that rising gas prices and an ‘employer’s economy’, in which taking time off from work can more easily result in one’s job being given to somebody else, ultimately did the event in, especially given the low-income status of a large proportion of its followers. It is also the case, as Cornerstone organizers expressed in their interviews, that bands whose only
refuge was once Cornerstone are now finding more acceptance on the mainstream rock festival circuit, as popular culture becomes more tolerant of overt expressions of Christian identity as long as the performer’s goal is not overtly evangelical. The festival’s refusal to compromise its principles and seek sponsors who offer donations based on the number of ‘souls saved’ by the event – a tactic pursued by the managers of many other CYMFs – may also explain why it was hit harder by the recession than other events (Johnston 2011). Finally, Cornerstone’s closing may be due in some measure to the simple vagaries of the life courses of key individuals involved in its production, as its long-time director moved on after the 2011 event, and follow-up contacts by the researcher revealed that several other festival organizers were in the process of leaving the JPUSA commune to transition into other life projects.

Interpretation and discussion

As two examples of popular CYMFs, Lifest and Cornerstone illustrate the diversity of this phenomenon. Ideologically, these festivals offer very different interpretations both of Christian religious doctrine and of what it means to live a life in accordance with Christian principles. These interpretations are articulated not only through the music performances featured at each festival, but also through other experiential elements on offer, such as talks, seminars, and visual art displays and performances, as well as through more passive channels, such as the literature available at information booths on site. Interestingly, however, there are key similarities at work in the way these festivals function to advance their own particular notions of Christianity and the way in which they are conducive to the formation and consolidation of a sense of Christian identity within the individuals who attend them. It is to this sociocultural reading of CYMFs as spaces of Christian ideology and identity construction that we now turn.

Leveraged liminality

Perhaps the most striking feature of CYMFs, from a social theorist’s point of view, is the central role of liminality in their production, not only as a perceived condition on the part of attendees but as a tool actively harnessed by festival organizers to generate desired outcomes. Liminality is a concept adopted from Van Gennep’s (1960) early anthropological work on rites of passage, which was then elaborated by Turner (1969) in his own work on initiation rituals and in his later work with Turner (1978) on pilgrimage. Liminality has frequently been applied in the study of tourism because travel is a classic activity that involves leaving one’s ordinary life space and its associated social norms, and finding oneself betwixt and between – not at home but also not a member of the society one is visiting. The experience of liminality in tourism sometimes prompts tourists to indulge in behaviours they would not regularly pursue at home (e.g. Ryan and Hall 2001; Uriely and Belhassen 2006; Maoz 2008). It can also open up the possibility of experiencing existential authenticity (Wang 1999; Steiner and Reisinger 2006), as tourists, freed from the constraints of everyday life, are able to feel more in touch with their ‘real selves’, and it can lead to the experience of communitas (Wang 1999), as tourists shed the status baggage that characterizes their ordinary lives and bond with one another on open terms, often with a ferventness that would not typically be expected among total strangers.
Liminality is alive and well at Lifest and Cornerstone, and not by accident or simple organic arising. Rather, it is an intentional characteristic of these events, identified and worked up by festival organizers to achieve particular ends. It begins with the way the events are organized to unfold in space and time. Both Lifest and Cornerstone are held in rural, remote locations (the latter a bit more so than the former). Attendees are encouraged to camp onsite, and this was especially the case at Cornerstone, where camping was arguably more a necessity than a choice, given the festival’s distance from any urban areas that could have offered sufficient lodging alternatives. Camping onsite opens a natural space of sociality and encourages attendees to bond with each other, by sharing supplies or simply by being immersed in the sense of intimacy that is created by camp proximity. Such outcomes were particularly common at Cornerstone, where those with little material wealth mixed easily with their more middle-class neighbours. The first author spied one festivalgoer arriving on the scene during the second day of Cornerstone, carrying only his backpack; he rolled out his sleeping mat under a tree and hung his bag on the branch above him. These were the contents of his home for the week, and he was not the only one. When interviewed, he revealed that he had hitchhiked to the festival. Another group of neighbours camping near the researcher had signed up as volunteers in exchange for discounted tickets. The three of them camped in their van, surviving the week on jars of Nutella, hamburger buns, and trips to the free Ramen tent, along with food shared by other attendees, including the researcher, whose Kraft Dinners were luxury items in the eyes of many onsite. Sharing space and food felt natural in this environment, and the researcher found she was never alone for meals.

The rather basic camp conditions also force attendees to do without the typical conveniences of home – things like indoor plumbing, kitchen appliances, and privacy. As two members of a popular band that played regularly at Cornerstone explained in their interview,

You have to get dirty here. It’s not comfortable to camp like this for a week, but it’s part of the experience … It’s what makes you open to a genuine experience. You can’t pretend here. People will see through it because you’re living with them for a week.

This effect is less pronounced at Lifest – a much more sanitized production, with grass-covered exhibition fields (as opposed to the dust and mud of Cornerstone) and clean shower facilities – but such conditions nevertheless feel exotic and exciting to participants, who tend to be younger teenagers leading relatively sheltered lives. For them, the festival feels like an adventure. Thus, at both festivals, separation from life’s modern conveniences (relative to the norms of each festivals’ demographic) allows attendees to experience a sense of material liberation, such that they can turn their full attention to spiritual concerns, devoting themselves to connecting with God and fellow members of their subculture – and festival organizers understand this.

Festival organizers also actively support a sense of liminality through their production choices, with regard to musical acts featured. The entire concept of a Christian rock festival revolves around the use of a form of artistic expression that is considered fringe and potentially dangerous to mainstream Christian values, but which nevertheless has an allure for many Christian young people (Howard and Streck 1999; Luhr 2009). Cornerstone overtly constituted itself as a space to push boundaries, in terms of the musical styles that were featured, by opening itself to harder rock genres that, according to festival
organizers, struggle to find acceptance in the mainstream Christian music scene. Lifest is tamer in its production choices in general, but it does include two stages, ‘The Edge’ and ‘The Pit’, where heavier genres are featured, and these alternative stages become somewhat of a further liminal space within the already liminal festival as a whole. In offering a space where harder genres of music can be experienced, all the while wrapped in the safe envelope of a Christian festival environment, Lifest and Cornerstone are able to create an atmosphere of controlled-decontrol (Uriely and Belhassen 2006) for participants. The Christian music subculture often invokes a discourse of ‘endangered youth’ versus ‘dangerous youth’, in which Christian young people are viewed as being at risk of losing their spiritual values through contact with a corrupting mainstream youth popular culture, and so CYMFs offer a carefully controlled way to navigate this interface, by providing participants with a sense of risk and of experiencing the taboo, but in an atmosphere that does not challenge their Christian faith.

A common theme expressed by long-time Cornerstone attendees was that they ‘lived for the week of the festival’, depending on it for spiritual and social sustenance, to nourish them through the rest of the year, as both mainstream secular culture and mainstream evangelicalism were in some ways hostile to their spiritual identities. This was true for performers as well as attendees. Such feelings are echoed vividly by Thompson (2012), Christian music author and diehard annual festivalgoer since Cornerstone’s inception, in his eulogy for the event series in Christianity Today: ‘Every aspect of my life has been touched by this community, and after this week, it’s as if my hometown is being wiped from the map or my native language is being officially retired.’

Festival organizers and performers thus seek to construct CYMFs as safe havens, where members of the Christian subculture can gather to feel included, accepted, and central rather than peripheral. The festivals’ liminality is important in creating an atmosphere where communitas can unfold, as attendees open up to one another and share expressions of faith in an ambience of trust, support, respect, and mutual understanding. Such experiences are central to Christian identity development and maintenance in an increasingly secular society, in which religious young people often feel ostracized by their peers – a condition intensified by their elders’ attempts to insulate them from mainstream youth culture, thus creating a social divide that can be difficult for adolescents to navigate.

Embodyed performativity

Festivals owe part of their power to their immersive, emotional dimension, which derives from the immediate sensory stimuli that envelop participants and evoke an immediate affective response (Duffy and Waitt 2011). Unlike mainstream music festivals, where attendees may be drawn in as much by the festival atmosphere and general genre of music featured as by the desire to see specific performers, the attendee demographic of CYMFs tends to be highly ‘in the know’ about the particular acts and songs on stage (indeed, the first author was struck by the almost encyclopaedic knowledge some individuals seemed to casually display of the Christian music scene, revealed as she chatted with fellow attendees between sets). Thus, the melodies and lyrics in the air at CYMFs are generally not new to festivalgoers, but rather are often already intimately known and richly
contextualized within the listener’s own life story. As we have argued elsewhere (Pastoor et al. 2015),

Hearing music that is deeply meaningful – music that one has perhaps played repeatedly alone with one’s thoughts, but which one now experiences with an awareness of the co-presence of both the performer of that music and others who are similarly moved by it – can be euphoric. Such emotions become all the more intense when the music in question functions symbolically as a sort of refuge from a world in which one feels misunderstood. (55)

Hearing such music live, singing along to it, and moving one’s body to it in synch with the rest of the undulating crowd becomes an act of both self-assertion and belonging.

CYMFs, in their immersive dimension, are far more than spaces for individual and communal euphoric expressions of identity validation, however. They also function as sites of ritual performance. Through their bodily engagement, attendees assert and reaffirm the truths set forth by their religious community, whether conservative or counterculture Christian. In this context, particular expressions of emotion and ways of displaying the body become almost obligatory. Rappaport (1999) has written extensively about the notion of ritual, which he defines as the fundamental social act that establishes obligations and commitments. In his reasoning, when people participate in rituals, they accept the terms imposed, validating those terms by their participation in the ritual, even if they do not possess an unambiguous belief in the sentiment behind it. To quote Lambek’s (2002) example in explicating Rappaport’s work

To engage in a marriage ceremony when one is eligible to do so is to get married and become obligated to live by its conditions – whatever one’s personal feelings in the matter. Whether or not the parties intend to keep their commitments, the point about ritual is that it produces them. (446, Lambek’s emphasis)

Thus, attendees’ behaviour at CYMFs may often be an expression of deeply felt personal conviction and individual spiritual transcendence, but it is always also a performance of Christian being, constituted within the terms of a particular community of believers, which helps to sustain that community’s form and expectations.

For conservative Christianity, CYMFs like Lifest offer a modernized take on the revivals of old. They are spaces of socialization, where youth learn to perform their faith in an emotionally appropriate way, while also responding appropriately and supportively to expressions of faith from others in their religious community. Attendees manifest their personal and direct relationship with Jesus – its cultivation and maintenance being the ultimate purpose in human life – by raising their hands in the air, with eyes closed, opening themselves spiritually to Christ’s presence. For a significant component of festival-goers, this performance culminates in movement to the altar, where they may repent sins, pray for strength in their faith, or (most commonly) fully accept (or re-accept) Jesus publicly as the path to salvation. This movement to the altar stands as a reaffirmation of the individual’s commitment to Christian principles as witnessed by his or her spiritual community, and thus holds social significance in establishing and maintaining his or her place within the larger group.

Altar calls are ubiquitous at Lifest, both at the end of speaker sessions and during musical performances, and as anyone not fully committed to conservative Christianity who has ever been present for one knows, they can be quite coercive. As young attendees watch others make the emotional journey to the altar, they may wonder ‘What is wrong
with me that I do not feel what others are feeling? Those who openly express doubt, however, are not admonished but rather are encouraged to lean even more strongly on their community for support in helping them to develop faith. Friends and family members of such individuals may request a prayer for their loved one, enacted through the ‘laying of hands’, in which the person leading the altar call or another spiritual leader who is present, often in conjunction with the individual’s family members or simply with other believers nearby, will place a hand on the head, shoulders, or back of the individual and pray aloud for the individual to be shown the path to Jesus. Thus, professions of doubt also become part of the ritual performance, as the communal laying of hands symbolizes the battle in which faith must triumph over doubt in the souls of individuals on the path to salvation. The embodied experience of the festival, characterized by the sensations of hearing the music, moving to it, and being part of the enormous crowd, amplifies the intensity of the ritual, thus rendering the festival a particularly important context for the constitution of conservative Christian identity.

Cornerstone, alternatively, housed a quite different kind of ritual performance, but one which was no less important for the religious identity development of its attendees. In order to understand this dimension of the festival, it is necessary to explore the concept of ‘transformational’ CCM, an analytical path also taken by Johnston (2011). Howard and Streck’s (1999) oft-cited analysis of CCM breaks the genre into three categories based on the attitudinal approaches of artists and listeners: (1) separational CCM, in which Christian music is viewed as a tool for evangelizing to non-believers and maintaining the commitment of believers, though the overt messages in its lyrics; (2) integrational CCM, which holds that Christian music need not constitute its own genre, with exclusively religious lyrics, but rather that the Christian identity of artists and their work as witnesses within the music industry is key; and (3) transformational CCM, which holds that art is the expression of the individual soul, that producing art is the realization of the soul’s potential, that this fulfilment of potential inherently glorifies the soul’s creator, and that engaging with other souls’ artistic expressions can aid in one’s own spiritual quest. Thus, individuals need not abandon their own aesthetic preferences to connect with God but should instead be true to themselves in order to realize their essence as spiritual beings (Johnston 2011).

As we have conveyed elsewhere (Pastoor et al. 2015) in describing Cornerstone, a music festival centred in transformational CCM would seem almost to constitute an anti-ritual, as artists are tasked with seeking their own path and attendees with connecting to artistic expressions in their own way. In reality, though, even the most tortured and solitary of artistic seekers, when they join with others like them, inevitably become alone together. Thus, ritual elements can still be observed, as attendees perform the identity of ‘counterculture Christian’ for one another, through their dress and body adornments – which frequently include spiked hair, body piercings, goth accoutrements, and other features that would be frowned upon in conservative Christian contexts – and through their actions, such as joining in the mosh pit or staging spontaneous musical or performance art displays. These performances help to establish a countercultural Christian identity which is reflexively responsive to mainstream forms of Christian selfhood and which serves as a critique of the limits of identity set by conservative Christianity. (56)

Radical critique of the mainstream Church is also manifest in the lyrics of several bands that frequented Cornerstone’s stage. Howard (1992) provides several excellent examples
in his analysis of Christian rock music as subversive cultural critique, such as Steve Taylor’s comment on intolerance and lack of diversity in the Church:

So now I see the whole design
My church is an assembly line.

Thousands of festivalgoers singing such lyrics in unison, to the howl of guitars and the clattering of percussion, certainly created quite a performance of resistance to authority and assertion of alternative Christian identity on the Cornerstone stage.

Youthful impressionability

Popular wisdom holds that youth is a time of impressionability, and psychological research on identity formation has tended to confirm this hunch, demonstrating adolescence to be a time when explorations are undertaken and decisions are made that often have long-term effects on one’s sense of personhood. Erikson (1950, 1968) was an early pioneer in this domain, and his work was later elaborated on by Marcia (1966, 1980) to produce the Identity Status Model, a perspective that has had enormous influence on the scholarship of adolescent development (Meeus et al. 1999). This model holds that young people can be generally characterized as being in one of four states of identity development, based on where they fall along two dimensions: exploration and commitment. Young people who are not actively exploring identity possibilities and have not committed to a particular expression of identity are considered to be in a state of identity diffusion. Those who have not explored but who have nonetheless made a commitment to a particular identity are referred to as identity foreclosed. Those who have undertaken an active exploration but who have not yet committed to an identity are labelled as being in identity moratorium. Those who have actively explored and have arrived at an identity they feel committed to are referred to as having reached identity achievement.

Psychologists do recognize that identity development is a lifelong process and that a simple teleology from diffusion (possibly through foreclosure) to moratorium to achievement is overly simplistic. Nevertheless, work subsequent to Marcia’s articulation of this framework has been largely supportive of its general value as a description of the process of identity development for many people, as well as its heightened applicability to the study of adolescence, as this is the age when people seem to show the most movement from one category to the next (Meeus et al. 1999). It has also been fruitfully applied in the context of religious identity development in youth (Fulton 1997).

Whether they have formally considered theories by the likes of Erikson and Marcia or not, CYMF organizers certainly have an implicit understanding of adolescence as a crucial time of life for the formation of ideological commitments. Lifest’s promotional materials make it clear that the organization’s goal is to reach young people before the age of 18 with their message. When asked about the reason for this during an interview, one organizer stated simply that this is the age when people are the most impressionable; hence, an experience like Lifest will presumably have the farthest-reaching effects on their future choices when encountered during this era of their lives. ‘After high school’, the organizer explained, ‘it’s harder to reach kids for Christianity’. Considering the Identity Status Model discussed above, along with much of the subsequent work investigating it (as
meta-analysed by Meeus et al. 1999), it is easy to see why this is the case. People of high school age and younger are much less likely than those slightly older than them to have moved into moratorium, the state of active identity searching. Instead they are more likely to be characterized by either diffusion or foreclosure. Foreclosure tends to occur when young people accept identity expressions handed to them by powerful sources of authority in their life-worlds, rather than opening themselves to multiple channels of information and then actively sifting that information for themselves. This can certainly happen in a religious context, if youth are pressured into accepting a particular religious ideology as the only path to living a good life (Fulton 1997; King and Roeser 2009).

Although Lifest’s organizers (unsurprisingly) did not overtly express a desire to intentionally push youth into a state of foreclosure, instead viewing themselves as supporting young people in having an opportunity to ‘find Jesus’ for themselves, from an analytical cultural studies perspective, it is difficult to conclude that Marcia’s Identity Status Model has nothing to do with the reason that ‘it’s easier to reach people for Christianity before the age of 18’. Conservative Christianity invokes frequent critique for dogmatism, constructing life in simplistic terms by offering an all-or-nothing path to salvation upon acceptance of very specific interpretations of Christian scripture and history – interpretations that are notably intolerant to some segments of society, such gays and lesbians, as well as disapproving of many of today’s mainstream lifestyle choices, such as cohabitation without marriage. Dogmatic paradigms are more easily embraced in youth, before one moves into a stage of identity moratorium characterized by relativistic rather than absolutist thinking, and it appears that conservative Christian parents and church leaders are aiming on some level to block their teens from entering such a time of questioning by preventing them from encountering mainstream influences that might encourage cognitive dissonance. CYMFs like Lifest thus encourage conservative Christian youth to stay in the fold by offering them a kind of equivalent to a coveted experience of mainstream adolescence – the rock festival – while simultaneously sheltering them from aspects of the mainstream version (e.g. nudity and sex, drugs and alcohol) that might undermine the interpretations of healthy identity development and morally sound life choices their religious community has worked to instill. In so doing, such events also offer young people a context for a powerful encounter with their faith – made possible through the festival’s liminal, embodied, and performative dimensions – precisely at a point in their identity development when the impact of this encounter with faith is likely to register most dramatically.

In contrast, Cornerstone organizers implicitly accepted identity moratorium as an inevitable passage in the lives of most people and were concerned specifically with supporting youth through that active stage of questioning and identity seeking. Holding to the idea of a faith journey as a very individualized experience, they expressed the view that a faith handed to a person externally will not ultimately be as durable as one he or she has negotiated for him or herself. This negotiation must be done in an open and non-threatening atmosphere of free questioning. In this process, life’s complexities need not be shunned, but instead should be engaged with overtly, thoughtfully, and without a demand for complete closure and order. Seminars held at Cornerstone thus encouraged attendees to engage with the complexities of the modern world, rather than seeking to sequester them in a bubble, safe from the intrusion of mainstream social discourse and concerns. Johnston (2011) also highlights faith mentorship as a goal of the festival, with organizers
seeking to foster an atmosphere of inter-generational mixing, where young people could connect with older Christians who had already successfully negotiated their religious identities for themselves (i.e. those who had already reached the ‘achieved’ state in Marcia’s matrix). Thus, the festival aimed to support Christian identity development as an ongoing process for its long-time fans, but even more importantly, as a complex and challenging journey for each new generation of attendees, who would need special support in building their own Christian identity actively, purposely, and for themselves – and out of choice, not fear.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Lifest and Cornerstone draw on the same management practices – facilitating and leveraging liminality, structuring their event to emphasize emotional and embodied sensation and ritual, and targeting an impressionable demographic – to advance their aims, different as these aims may be. Lifest draws a young crowd of teens and ‘tweens’ and functions largely to consolidate Christian identity during the turmoil of adolescence, when young people may feel vulnerable in their faith because it is largely a product constructed by their elders rather than being self-determined, and one which tends to place them at odds with their more mainstream peers, leading to feelings of ‘difference’ and potential alienation. Cornerstone drew an older crowd of late-teens and young adults and encouraged them to confront the complexities of life and to develop a Christian faith that could function within this complexity. The goal was to support young attendees in building a religious identity that would be durable in a world characterized more by grey area than by the black-and-white picture traditionally offered by conservative Christianity.

In twenty-first-century America, the ideoscape of Christianity is contested territory indeed. Given the imbrication of religion and politics in the U.S., the shape that Christianity takes there is consequential, both for Americans and for the rest of the world. In particular, it affects the lives of American minority groups, who may find themselves on the negative end of prejudicial attitudes and behaviours that have been shown to be correlated with fundamentalist religious orientations (Hunsberger 1995; Hunsberger and Jackson 2005).

This study has attempted to shed light on one important forum for Christian socialization and identity-building – the CYMF – and to thus illustrate the sociocultural importance of such leisure events. Even at this writing, however, the landscape of CYMFs is changing, with some festivals going strong and others disappearing from the scene entirely. In addition to Cornerstone’s closing in 2012, other major festivals have shut their doors in the past few years, including New Zealand’s Parachute in 2014 and Australia’s Easterfest in 2015. The ties to corporate and other organizational sponsorship that arguably are a major reason many U.S. festivals have not faced Cornerstone’s fate constitute a further point of inquiry that could be made into the alliances of power that maintain parachurch leisure activities like CYMFs as sites of ideological production – an interesting twist on the growing research concern with the commoditization of festivals and the leisure experiences they offer in general (Sharpe 2008). The Cornerstone organizers interviewed in this project made it clear that it would not be consistent with their values to begin accepting corporate sponsorship. While it is less clear, at least from what one can glean through the public media, what financial challenges led to the decline of Parachute
and Easterfest, executive statements on the closing of Parachute made clear that the festival team felt it had made all the compromises it could in order to keep the festival alive and expressed concern about ensuring that the festival was not taken away from the direction of its original vision — or the mission of its parent organization, Parachute Music, undercut — simply to secure the festival’s continuation (Parachute Music 2016). One begins to wonder whether CYMFs rooted in conservative Christianity, with their more open views toward commercialization, will become the only game in town.

But at the same time, new counterculture festivals are rising up, such as Audiofeed, which emerged as the ‘spiritual heir’ to Cornerstone in 2013 and involves many of the same parties in its organizational aspects. Although we have yet to formally study this festival (now in its third year), it is clear from the organization’s website that corporate sponsorships are accepted and encouraged (although the organizers are clear to contextualize this as only one of the many ways people can provide support for the festival, and they place a much larger discursive emphasis on members of their community helping the festival grow through ‘bringing a friend along next year’, rather than through beating the streets for sponsorship funds). It is also clear that, although openly and proudly Christian in its identity, Audiofeed has chosen to frame itself as being founded on a philosophy of ‘unconditional love’, conceptualized ‘without regard for appearance, religious belief, race, societal status, or any other thing that separates’ people, and that the festival openly seeks to be inclusive of musicians and attendees who share this value even if they are expressly non-Christian in terms of the way they articulate their identities (Audiofeed Festival 2016). One might expect this framing to limit sponsorship opportunities from particular directions (although perhaps to encourage others), but what it certainly does is to indirectly place some bounds around how such a festival can commercialize in practice, by suggesting some ideological lines across which compromises will not be made.

Who, in the future, will hold the power to help shape what it means to be a Christian, and what harvest will the world reap from the seeds there sown? While we cannot answer these questions, this much is clear: leisure is, and will likely continue to be, an important context in the contemporary era through which identities — including religious and theopolitical identities — are shaped. We must continue to attend closely to the role management practices play in such spaces, in fostering ideological outcomes that can ultimately hold consequences for both individual identities and world politics.

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