

Queer Rural Liminality: Storymapping My Educational Journey as a Queer Rural College Student

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This article explores the creation of a digital storymap tracing the author's journey as a white, queer, and transfemme college student from a rural background. Prompted by a graduate school narrative, the project revisits and reframes the story using the framework of queer rural liminality (QRL), which understands queerness, rurality, and liminality as co-constitutive and dynamic. Using ArcGIS StoryMaps—a digital storytelling platform—the project weaves together images, theory, personal narrative, and past writings to represent the fluidity of place, queerness, and rurality. Through restorying the author's educational journey as a queer rural college student, the storymap resists binary assumptions of rurality and queerness as being incompatible. It demonstrates how educational environments can serve as sites of resistance and possibility for queer rural college students. In doing so, the project contributes to emerging scholarship on queer rural student experiences and illustrates how digital storytelling can be a powerful tool for identity exploration and meaning making in educational contexts.

Queer college students who have a rural identity or come from a rural background and pursue higher education are a relatively overlooked student population in higher education research and literature (Christiaens, 2015; McNamee & Tate, 2022; Sorgen & Rogers, 2021; Sorgen et al., 2024). As an attempt to intervene in this absence and provide layers to the experiences of queer college students from rural backgrounds, I created a [storymap](#) about my experiences as a white, queer, transfemme college student

who grew up in a rural environment (Christiaens, 2022).¹ The storymap project was built through ArcGIS StoryMaps, a storytelling tool and web-based application which allows the storyteller to share maps in the context of narrative text and other multimedia content. ArcGIS StoryMaps provided an opportunity to revisit this personal narrative through a creative and spatial medium in order to demonstrate the fluidity and complexity of queerness and rurality.

The inspiration for the storymap came from a personal narrative I wrote while in graduate school (Christiaens, 2015) at a midsized university in New England. This

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¹ Throughout my storymapping project and this narrative, I position my transfemme identity as part of my queerness in order to provide cohesion with my original work (Christiaens, 2015) and how I understand myself in the present moment. Therefore, I will use the following terms—queer and queerness—as a way to holistically capture how I think and write about my gender and sexual identities and their co-constitutive nature. Also, I chose to represent my racial identity (e.g. “white”) in the lower case format. This choice reflects current debates in critical whiteness studies in education and is informed by the work of Pérez Huber (2010) who recommends not capitalizing “white” in order to reject the grammatical representation of power which occurs when capitalizing this word.

narrative was a personal project, prompted by the theme of student transitions for the 2015 issue of the student-run graduate journal, *The Vermont Connection*. In the narrative, I responded to the lack of queer rural college students' perspectives in the literature by retelling my own story and experiences with rurality and queerness during my transition from high school to college. Since my personal narrative was published, scholarship with this focus has increased. At the same time, so many aspects of queer rural college student life have yet to be explored, and many stories have yet to be told.

Coming Into My Story: Rural Background and College Transition

I grew up in central Montana, under the big sky and next to the towering Rocky Mountains, where some of my earliest memories are of a small rental farmhouse under the shadow of an impressive landmark called Rattlesnake Butte. I was a creative and ambitious child whose embodiment of difference at a young age, especially around my gender and weight, meant I had frequent experiences in school of being othered. My youth occurred during the early years of the internet, and I sought to understand these experiences of being othered through the limited digital resources available to me at the time. However, because of a lack of queer role models, I was not prepared to embrace those parts of myself until college. When I received a postcard from an undergraduate Jesuit institution in Seattle, WA, I was determined to do something my parents had never done: leave the state of Montana to pursue a college degree in the *big city*. During my time in undergrad, I connected with queer and trans students, staff, and faculty and finally had access to the resources I needed to help me come into my queer and transness.

Even though my educational journey involved moving to the big city of Seattle as part of my queer journey, in my story, I wanted to challenge the urban normative (Thomas et al., 2011) and queer metronormative (Halberstam, 2005) frames regarding queer rural college students. These frames position rural spaces as being inherently conservative, unfulfilling, underresourced, homogenous, and undesirable. Because of stereotypes and expectations of rural spaces and the social imaginary of rurality (Muller, 2019), these frames also view rurality and queerness as irreconcilable and diametrically opposed. When attending my undergraduate institution, I internalized these messages of urban normativity and queer metronormativity, believing the place I used to call home would never fully accept me and believing in the rural deficit narrative which typically follows rural students who aspire to college (Maltazan,

2006). In undergrad, I embraced a queer identity entirely removed from my rural upbringing and my values, such as resourcefulness, collectivism, and interconnectedness (Crumb et al., 2023; Gray, 2009). The ultimate aim of the three-page personal narrative I wrote in graduate school (Christiaens, 2015) was to explore my rural background and queer identity in tandem in order to resist these deficit and normative frameworks of queerness and rurality.

Revisiting My College Story Through Storymapping

At the time of writing my narrative in graduate school, I simply wanted to reclaim who I was told I could not be and what my experiences of rurality were. However, this reclamation relied on capturing a specific place and time and reified hegemonic understandings of queerness and rurality. In particular, while I was able to think about and describe my queerness as fluid and contextual in my personal narrative, I still wrote about rurality in a fixed, static and deficit way. Several years after writing my personal narrative, I found myself in another schooling environment, pursuing my doctorate in higher education at a large Research 1 public land-grant university in the Southwest. I had an opportunity in my program to take a class on critical geographies in higher education. This class explored the role of space, place and power in postsecondary educational environments and how these dimensions influence students' sense of belonging, educational inequities and identity meaning making. In the class, I also learned about ArcGIS StoryMaps as a digital storytelling tool. Taking the class inspired me to revisit my narrative from graduate school and refashion a new story which paid more attention to place, described rurality as a liminal concept, and deepened how I understood my queerness and rurality in higher education.

In revisiting my story and my thinking, I wanted to represent the fluidity of place, queerness, and rurality through creative means beyond the written word. A specific limitation of my original personal narrative was a lack of imagery and visuals, elements often critical to constructing understandings of rurality. ArcGIS StoryMaps provided me the opportunity to add a visual and spatial sense to my own narrative, emphasizing how rurality coexists as a place-based identity (Cain, 2021) and as a lens of meaning making. The storymapping project (Christiaens, 2022) foregrounded my experiences as a white, queer, transfemme college student from a rural background. In particular, it explored and demonstrated how my own understanding of these identities and experiences was greatly influenced by the educational institutions I attended in both rural and urban settings and the educators who supported and mentored me. Throughout the storymap, images of my rural upbringing are threaded

across personal storytelling, quotes from my graduate school narrative, and academic writing to reflect how stories and meaning making are a nonlinear, imaginative, and contextual process, ever evolving and always in flux. I refer to my storymap as a *(re)mapping* project to signal coming back to my experiences in education time and time again in order to generate new insights on those experiences and my own conceptualizations of queerness and rurality.

Elements of the Digital Storymap

The storymap begins with a question about where my story of queerness and rurality should start: Does it start with my personal narrative, my earliest memories of rurality, or my current context as a doctoral student? This reflection demonstrates the liminality of place and storytelling while disrupting an expectation to tell queer rural stories of education in a linear way. What follows in the storymap project is a description of my positionality and context setting, which highlights the article I published in graduate school and why I felt compelled to return to this piece of writing. After the positionality and context section, I included a chronological timeline of the educational institutions I had attended until the present time, represented through a map of North America and geographical place markers for each school or college. This part of the storymap characterized my location, locale, and sense of place (Agnew, 1987) to represent how sites of education informed the ways I came to know myself and my identities more fully. Each geographic marker in the timeline describes the physical place of the school or college and salient aspects of the educational institution I attended, including brief descriptions of the specific influence the institution had on my queer and rural sense of self.

The storymap continues with an explanation of the framework I used to revisit my graduate school narrative—queer rural liminality (QRL)—which views the concepts of rurality, queerness, and liminality as co-constitutive and understands space, place, and power as central to understandings of queerness and rurality. As it relates to education, the QRL framework intervenes in the perception of educational environments (both primary and postsecondary settings) as inherently and perpetually hostile or marginalizing to queerness and rurality. Instead, it proposes how those environments can be sites of disruption, resistance, transition, and possibility for individuals who view and experience the world as an in-between place. Because relationships and relationality are central to queerness and rurality, QRL also recognizes how the individuals in these educational environments (e.g. educators, student peers, administrators) are essential to the meaning-making process of queer rural college students. The storymap then briefly covers relevant literature on

queer rural college students and emerging explorations on the rural assets these students use to navigate, thrive, and succeed in college settings.

In the second half of my storymap, I returned to my graduate school narrative through the lens of the QRL framework. This analytical process surfaced newfound insights around my queerness and rural background. The restorying of my personal narrative included several reflection questions, which encouraged me to consider aspects of my story differently and added nuance to the conclusions I drew about my story. In this way, the restorying played with the “gray space” brought forth by queerness, rurality, and liminality, and it also demonstrated the fluid nature of the storymap itself. Therefore, the storymap was a continuation of the reclamation process with which I engaged (and with which I will continue to engage) around my younger queer and transfemme self who was unable to envision their full self while growing up in the Mountain West in the 1990s and early 2000s. In doing so, the restorying aspect of the storymap recognized the reality of the cisheterosexism embedded within my rural upbringing and rural educational environments, while naming the sites of queer possibility in those rural and urban educational settings. Therefore, it connected the rural assets of my upbringing with the generative knowledge and insights derived from my queerness and my experiences of liminality.

Insights From Storymapping as an Educational Tool

The storymap was a creative and academic endeavor to reclaim, reconstitute, and restory my educational journey as a queer rural college student. The use of ArcGIS StoryMaps as a storytelling tool—particularly how it attended to space and place—sought to challenge static ideas of queerness and rurality, which tend to limit and constrain how educators and researchers understand the queer rural college student experience. The storymap also emphasized liminality (Banfield, 2022; March, 2021) as a useful concept for examining the experiences of this student population. In this way, the storymap gestures toward how educators and administrators can think about the unique needs of queer rural college students and engage in mechanisms of support for this student population in ways which honor students’ context, positionality and educational background.

Because the idea of the storymap emerged from an experience in class, it also demonstrates the creative and expansive utility of storymapping for students’ storytelling and meaning making. Storymapping as an instructive teaching and learning tool is not only a platform for queer rural college students to reclaim rural sights and spaces and explore their own identity development. It also can be a useful platform for students whose identities are tied to

space and place, such as international students. Therefore, this (re)mapping project honored the queer rural college student experience while offering implications for students who want to explore the role of space and liminality in their experience of higher education.

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