

# Amanda Martinez Beck

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## SPEAKERS

Elizabeth Melton, Amanda Martinez Beck

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**E** Elizabeth Melton 00:06

I'm Elizabeth Melton, the ACLS Leading Edge Fellow for the IDCL, and I'm here interviewing Amanda Martinez Beck for the Voices of Change collection in the Religions Texas archive. Today is Thursday, December 2, 2021, and we are meeting via Zoom. I'm calling from Boone, North Carolina. Where are you, Amanda?

**A** Amanda Martinez Beck 00:29

I'm in Marshall, Texas.

**E** Elizabeth Melton 00:31

Marshall, Texas. Awesome. Well, thank you so much for meeting with me today. Again, we'll get started with just a few questions about your early life. So can you tell me where you were born, and just a little bit about your family?

**A** Amanda Martinez Beck 00:47

I was born in Odessa, Texas in 1984. My parents are my mom [who] is a native Texan, who was an Air Force brat, so grew up all over the world, and my father is a Cuban refugee. We lived near all of his brothers and sisters in West Texas until we moved to East Texas in 1989 and settled in Longview and grew up upper middle class. My father is a physician, and my mom is a stay at home mom, and we're very religious. We attended church weekly. I attended public school. I have a younger sister and an older sister who didn't live with us, but my younger sister and I had a magical childhood.

**E** Elizabeth Melton 02:04

That's awesome. Thank you. Can you describe a little bit more what your community was like outside of your family and growing up?

**A** Amanda Martinez Beck 02:14

I found community largely through church activities and school activities. The community of Longview has some racial tension, historical racial tension, and the schools that I attended were attempts at integration with GT [Gifted and Talented] programs in more impoverished areas. I grew up in a larger body and so was more on the sidelines of my peers and found camaraderie with other people on the margins. Being within my own White peers, I should say, because even though our classes were attempts at integration, we were still very segregated. But I was surrounded by neurodiverse people, and that was really special.

**E** Elizabeth Melton 03:44

That's great. Thank you. Can you describe your current work as an activist? Who is your community and who do you serve?

**A** Amanda Martinez Beck 03:54

So I am a fat liberation activist. My activism is based on the idea that every person, no matter the size of their body, should be treated with dignity and respect, and that we all possess inherent dignity. I address issues in personal life, the person's self-image and also internal self-talk; in interpersonal relationships with family, friends, coworkers; at a community level, in churches and workplaces; and then at a systemic structural level, in advocating for just non-discrimination laws for people of size and the battle against medical fatphobia. Those are the four levels of activism, and almost all of my activism is done online, which is really interesting because it's a very embodied subject matter. But I've found that to be really helpful because all of the people I interact with can be located anywhere in the world. There are a lot of age thirty to forty-five-year-old women that I do most of my work with.

**E** Elizabeth Melton 05:38

Thank you. So how do you understand those communities, particularly if they're online, what does that look like?

**A** Amanda Martinez Beck 05:49

So I have an idea that I call "fat hospitality," which is making sure people know that they have the right to take up space that their body needs. And that is something that you do in person, but also online. Fat people are patrolled by thin people, for stepping out of line of the general narrative that thinner is better, so when a fat person is existing in their full self without apology, that can cause friction and inhospitable conditions. So in my online spaces, like my

Instagram feed, my podcast Fat and Faithful, my Facebook group called All Bodies are Good Bodies, I'm cultivating a space of fat hospitality, where people have the right to take up space. And people of all sizes are welcome, but my work is centered on fat bodies.

E

Elizabeth Melton 06:59

Can you share a story about a day in the life of an organizer?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 07:04

Sure. I have four children, so when their needs have been attended to and they've gotten to school, I plan out an Instagram post for the day, or a post for my patrons. Typically, that includes outfit of the day, and that may sound like not activism, but just existing in a fat body is pushing the narrative, especially when a fat person inhabits a body with joy. So taking a picture or a video and posting it with relevant hashtags. Then I write. That is the major function in my activism is writing. So I write everything from book length projects, to articles, I do interviews and podcasts, and I write for some apps that focus either on religion, like the Our Bible app, or on body liberation, like the UnDiet Your Mind app. So finding ways to get the message out, that's usually what I'm doing. If I'm not producing content, then I'm searching for a platform to share content.

E

Elizabeth Melton 08:53

That's really interesting. I know some of what you do, right? I know a lot about the writing, so it's interesting to hear more about what you're doing all the time.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 09:02

It's interesting to put it all together because as a stay at home mom who works part time, it's life on the margins, the margins of the day, where activism happens. I'm very privileged that my children all go to school., so I have a big chunk of day to do activism, but during the summers and holidays, those are definitely secondary to my other responsibilities.

E

Elizabeth Melton 09:38

Absolutely. So that's one challenge that you face doing this work, but what are some other challenges that you've encountered?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 09:49

People don't like the word "fat." That is part of the reason that fat activists have chosen to use it, as a provocative symbol of what we're standing against: the idea that fatness is bad or uncomfortable. In my early years of activism, I used terms like "size dignity" or "body acceptance," sometimes rarely "body positivity." But having more experience, I've learned that

the word "fat" has to be in what I call myself, because I get my cards on the table. I am a fat liberationist, and I believe that until it's okay for anybody to be fat, and for everybody to be fat, then nobody can truly have body peace, in a societal way. Because if fat people are excluded, it's not real liberation. Just the use of the word "fat" and the concept of fatness as good is a big stumbling block for people. Especially in religious circles, which is very frustrating for me, because of the way that I see my own Catholic religion as being a champion for the weak and marginalized in our society, which in contemporary society includes fatness and disability. Fellow Christians are some of the most fiercest opponents to the work that I do.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 11:52

Another limitation is my fat body. And I have two kinds of limitations off the top of my head. The first kind is that while beauty is arbitrary, based on culture, cultural depictions of beauty shift body sizes all over the world. But in our culture, thin bodies are prized and fat bodies are deemed too much or slovenly or lazy. So I find that my fellow colleagues who are doing body liberation, fat liberation, who exist in smaller bodies have an easier time of explaining their platform because of our unconscious bias against fat people. Conscious and unconscious bias against fat people. So that's one way that my body limits my work. And another way is that I do have disability, and something someone said to me, I can't remember it as wonderfully as I said it, but that disability is an inevitability for humans. So when my body has faced limitations - I'm a COVID survivor, so a lot of my disability stems from being hospitalized with COVID in 2020. I'm not able to do as much of the in-person speaking, and also my time doing activism work is limited just because I need more rest. So those are two ways that my body limits the work that I do, and yet that also fuels my activism. So limits are really beneficial in a lot of ways.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 14:05

Fat activism is intimately associated with disability rights, because there is a huge part of fat activism that says fatness should be viewed as a disability. And then there's a group of people that think fatness should not be viewed as a disability. Even within our own field, there's disagreement as to whether fat activism is disability activism. The overlaps are great because the Americans with Disabilities Act is about accessibility, and fatness is about accessibility. For example, when people are wondering, "Am I fat?" I tell them to do the chair test, which is when you go into a public place, and the chairs have arms, do you fit? Do you need to ask for special accommodation for seating because your hips are wider than the chairs? And if so, then you can feel confident calling yourself fat. Well, that's an accessibility issue. It also has to do with accessibility for clothing, and for public transportation. In my mind, fatness is an accessibility issue as much as any other disability, so I would say that fat activism is disability activism.

E

Elizabeth Melton 15:48

Thank you. Yeah, you never want to put a label onto someone.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 15:54

No. I appreciate that. I think that shows "to call you out a little bit" and "to call myself out" is

no, I appreciate that. I think that shows us to call you out a little bit, and to call myself out is the reason we don't want to put a disability label on fatness is because we view disability negatively.

E

Elizabeth Melton 16:07

Absolutely.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 16:10

It's the same thing with using the word "fat." The only reason we wouldn't qualifyâ€”no, not the only reasonâ€”a big reason we wouldn't qualify fatness as disability is because we view disability poorly, and not neutrally. Those are the obstacles that I can think of.

E

Elizabeth Melton 16:32

On a more celebratory note, what are some of your successes, and what are some of the things that you're most proud of accomplishing?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 16:45

I have a new book coming out, which is book number two. Book number one came out in 2018, and it's called *Lovely: How I Learned to Embrace the Body God Gave Me*, and it's a Catholic perspective on the goodness of the human body. It's accessible ecumenically, but I wrote from a Catholic perspective, because that is my perspective. Then the second book that's coming out in May of 2022, is called *More of You: The Fat Girl's Field Guide to the Modern World*, and that's with Broadleaf Books out of Minneapolis. It is a practical and impractical guide to existing in the world in a fat body. And it's accessible to readers of any size, and I would love for people of all sizes to read it, but I'm especially speaking to the people who've grown up and now currently exist in larger bodies. How to advocate for oneself, how to challenge the voice of the inner body critic, and how to live a joyful life in a fat body.

E

Elizabeth Melton 18:11

So that audience is for folks that were fat as kids, right, and also now?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 18:20

I wrote the book as a guide for what I wish I had known in grade school and on. And I think you don't have to have lived in a larger body as a child, because we all get the same messaging that women in particular need to be smaller and quieter. And if people know me, that's the opposite of who I am. Large and loud and ready to challenge the status quo.



E

Elizabeth Melton 18:59

Do you think that your interest in writing something like that right now is tied to your identity as a mother as well, and as a mother of three girls, and one boy?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 19:12

I am still in the incubation phase of the parenting advice [laughs]. My oldest daughter is nine years old, so we're just on the brink of preteen reality, which is probably the hardest time to live in a culture so obsessed within this. A lot of the implicit messaging happens as young as five from school about the morality of food, the morality of body size, but that's largely been authority figures imposing those things. I think as bodies change, there's a lot more commentary. So I'm still in the incubation phase of figuring out how to parent children in larger bodies. But I do have a tool that I developed called the Fat Girl's Bill of Rights, which is included in my upcoming book. But it is a set of ten rights that each person has that I wish that my parents had been able to teach me. Things like, "I have the right to take up space. I have the right to wear whatever clothes I want. I have the right to eat the foods that I like. I have the right to compassionate medical care without fat shaming." There are six more that I'm forgetting off the top of my head. Yes, I look back, and I think of how I may have parented myself, and that's how I'm parenting my own inner child, and attempting to parent my external children.

E

Elizabeth Melton 21:22

That's awesome. So you spoke a little bit to this about why you wrote your most recent book, as something you wish you'd had when you're a kid. But overall, what led you to do this type of activism and this work?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 21:39

I am an external processor, and writing is a great way to figure out what I think. I'm also a challenger of the status quo, especially when I see other people or myself subject to injustice. Because I seemed to have a knack for writing as a kid, I wanted to be a writer when I grew up. People seem to resonate with the things that I write, so it fell together of seeing injustice and wanting to correct it, and then having a gift or talent, and something I enjoyed, and the marriage of those two things.

E

Elizabeth Melton 22:41

That's awesome. I love that. I understand that perspective, too, of writing as a way to process, and it helps you figure out what you even think, I think, sometimes.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 22:52

Right.

E

Elizabeth Melton 22:54

So how does religion or spirituality guide the work that you do?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 23:04

A lot of my internalized shame that I have encountered because of the size of my body has come from sources in a religious setting. Whether it be verses in the scriptures taken out of context - for example, the biggest one, I think, is when Paul talks in First Corinthians, he says, "Don't you know that you are not your own? Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." And that verse used to manipulate people into weight loss and dieting and exercise. Or myself in my religious zeal, noticing that I was different than the people that I admired within the church and wanting to conform myself to their image. Because I didn't see many fat people in leadership positions. The very nature of religion, being a quest for morality, in a culture that moralizes body size, that easily translated into thinness is closer to godliness.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 24:47

So that is one huge way that religion has influenced my development in my current position, because the more I read the Christian scriptures and the life of Jesus, the more I saw that God loves to take the unexpected route into world change. He literally says in Deuteronomy, to the nation of Israel, "I didn't pick you because you were the strongest or the most populated, I picked you because you were the smallest. The least in number and the least military might." So this idea of turning the world on its head is very Judeo-Christian, of subverting expectations. Starting to analyze body things from a religious standpoint with that framework, it's like, "Okay, we live in a world of might makes right, where people with power are considered to be the moral ones." In body size, that means there is a hierarchy, where thin people, the thinner you are, the more cultural power you hold. If I'm looking at structural power, in a fat body, I have less power than someone in a thin body, maintaining for race and ethnicity and orientation. My power differential is lower than a White, cis, straight woman in our culture. So what would Jesus do? What is Jesus doing for the least of our society? There are so many marginalized identities that need attention. I found that in order to avoid a savior-ism complex of, "I have all the answers for all these marginalized identities," I just decided to write about what I knew, which was living in a fat body.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 27:53

So that's how religion has impacted my thinking, but another way it has is - and I'm still wrestling with this, because it's so uncomfortable, the way that we've been raised - is that fatness is a sign of God's abundance. And that's a good thing. So my body as a prophetic witness to the abundance of the kingdom of God. The universe is ever expanding, and the only thing we don't want to expand are our bodies, and I don't see a good reason to be against that. So this concept of the abundant harvest, where you eat and drink and you have your fill, it's very counter to diet culture. I just think that the abundance of God is the antidote for diet culture.

E

Elizabeth Melton 29:10

Yeah, I love the focus on the abundance of God. You mentioned early on, too, that a lot of your perspective is rooted in your Catholic beliefs now. How does that guide your sense of ethics or social justice? And I'll ask since I'm more familiar with your background a little bit, what led you to Catholicism?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 29:52

I'll start with the what led me to Catholicism, because I grew up in a Protestant and evangelical nondenominational setting, Bible Church. Fundamentalist Bible Church, with very kind people, and well-intentioned people who formed me. But I noticed in our theology, at least the way that it played out, that we were embracing this kind of dualism of our bodies are bad, but our spirits are good. That lent itself to all sorts of things, mostly a neglect and hatred of the physical body. In neglect, [it was] really common to be told, "You just need to work harder for God and ignore your body's needs like food and sleep and rest." Because we have this very producer mindset and capitalist mindset, especially within the church. In fact, I heard someone refer to it as "entrepreneurial Christianity." I was like, "Ooh, yes." Honestly, reading Max Weber in college, and [The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism]. But this idea that we're so focused on production, and we don't give ourselves any margin for resting.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 31:49

I learned in my religion classes at Baylor University, that the early church encountered this problem of dualism, and they said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, not so fast. The incarnation of Jesus, which is God taking on a human body, proves that bodies are just as good as spirit." That blew my mind, but it felt right. So from then, it would be another almost ten years before I became Catholic, but started to want to really know, "Okay, what's this incarnational faith about? If it's not spirit versus flesh, what is it?" And out of that tension of, "I was taught to hate my body, yet I'm reading early church teachers saying, 'Don't do that, and that it's a matter of very prime importance that you not do that,'" that my faith started to shift from a dualistic one to an international one. And along with that came the reading of the Gospel through a lens - as opposed to, "I'm living for the eschaton. I'm just living until Jesus gets back, doesn't matter what happens on Earth, because God's just gonna save us and destroy everything that's evil." Started to be like, "Well, if my body is good, then your body is good. And if your body is not being fed, or clothed, or housed, or if you're in prison, then I need to do something about that, because we're siblings."

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 34:16

When Jesus talks in the Gospels, when he is giving an example, like, "When I was sick, you came to me. When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was naked, you clothed me," and he says, "You did all this for me." And they said, "When did we do these things for you, Lord?" He says, "Whenever you did that to the least of my brethren, you did that for me." So this just mind blowing revelation of, "Oh my God. I've always loved Jesus, but he's literally saying to love him is to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit those in prison, and visit the sick." That's social justice in a nutshell, and the Golden Rule: treat others the way that you want to be treated. So



my thinking about bodies and my thinking about just what does an incarnated faith look like, those took form in college and the years beyond, and then became - this is where Catholicism gets really weird, so I'm just going to put this disclaimer out there. But the idea that what we do in our bodies impacts the spirit world. I think it's a fundamentally Christian idea, but I think it's particularly seen in the Catholic sacraments or in just the Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's table. But that what we do, like when we're washed with the water, it actually changes something in the spirit world, because the spirit world is here. We're living in the spiritual flesh-filled world. I just wanted more of that, so we, at the time, felt like the Catholic Church was the best option for that.

**A** Amanda Martinez Beck 36:44

So we became Catholic and baptized all our kids. But the thing I'll be honest about is, with the advent of Donald Trump, and the, quote, "pro-life movement" marrying itself to such a racist, misogynist, anti-immigrant person—my Scriptures teach me to welcome the immigrant. There was such a cognitive dissonance amongst my co-religionists for the sake of saving preborn humans, that I couldn't do it anymore, and we stopped attending Catholic Church. We still love Pope Francis, and we still consider ourselves Catholic. But we founded another church to be a part of that is ministering in ways and standing up for people in ways that our local Catholic entities were not. So embodiment is very rooted in our faith, and that led us to and away from the Catholic Church.

**E** Elizabeth Melton 38:26

Yeah, I think that there's something that's also as much cultural as religious that can often affect the ways in which different churches practice their beliefs and that sort of thing.

**A** Amanda Martinez Beck 38:42

Absolutely, and one of the hardest parts of an incarnational faith for me, is recognizing my shared humanity with those who disagree with me on a fundamental level, and still valuing their bodies as the same. I am called to still do the same to them that I would want to be done to myself. I don't know what it would be like if I still lived in a dualistic religion, because I could just label things as bad that were not comfortable. That's just not how an incarnated world works.

**E** Elizabeth Melton 39:44

As an activist who is situated in Texas and has lived most of her life in East Texas, how, if at all, does that influence the work that you do?

**A** Amanda Martinez Beck 40:09

We live at the edge of Southern belle culture. You and I grew up in the same city, so you're familiar with this, but for posterity, I will explain it. In our social circles, I had friends that

debuted into society. A debutante ball I attended, I did not participate, but I attended, where my peers came out in beautiful ball gowns, and bowed, and danced with their fathers, and alcohol abounded. So I'm Southern belle adjacent. But I'm not a cowgirl, either. There's is this third way [laughs] of living that I carved out. As an immigrant's daughter, I always have lived in a third culture because I didn't fully inhabit the cultures of either of my parents. Being Southern belle adjacent, having the expectations of Southern belle culture, especially for upper middle class physician's daughters. Lived in the same neighborhoods, attended the same schools and same parties. So living in a larger body and as a teetotaler put me, like I said, in this other culture. That was in Longview, Texas.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 42:14

What I found is moving farther east to Marshall, even though I'm physically closer to the deep South. At one point, Marshall was a huge hub for Confederate activity during Civil War. There's a lot of that racial tension leftover, former plantations. But the bodies here look different than they do in Longview which is twenty miles away, and I think that has a lot to do with the median income, because thinness, so many times, is a privilege. I have met so many more fat bodies here, particularly women of my age. So I, for the first time in my adult life, have been pleasantly surprised at the bodies that are like mine amongst my peers. That's just been an interesting experience within my activism to not be in the minority any more, and I hope that leads to more in-person activism, but we'll see where that goes. We just moved here.

E

Elizabeth Melton 43:59

Yeah, having also just moved somewhere in coming out of the pandemic, it's a very strange time to get to know a new community, I feel like.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 44:07

It really is.

E

Elizabeth Melton 44:08

New and interesting challenges. Thinking more broadly again about your work, what is your vision for community? I mean, you're speaking to it a little bit even just about being in Marshall, but what do you hope your community will continue to develop into?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 44:44

My dream is to have a space of fat hospitality in-person. Kind of like fat camp, but not trying to make you lose weight. Fat camp where you just get to come and be, and I would love for that to be in Texas, because I think our cultural situation here is so focused on being the biggest, except when it's talking about women's bodies. I think that - and this is where my religion bleeds in - I think there's a need for redemption of that. Let's take pride in the bigness of our

state. Let's take pride in the big bodies that inhabit our state. Most people in Texas are fat, yet nobody talks about that. Most people in our country are fat. I think we're just really uniquely situated to be able to welcome fat people.

E

Elizabeth Melton 45:55

Yeah, I love that: bigness, and the idea of a space to just celebrate and be joyful.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 46:02

Right. Like I said before, until fat people are free to be fat then everyone is still trying to be smaller no matter their size. So it's not just for fat people that this hospitality exists.

E

Elizabeth Melton 46:24

Thinking about this, what are some of your short term and long term goals? Again, you've been speaking around this, I think, to some degree.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 46:34

Short term goals would be conferences where people come to Texas and learn about the joy of bigness and abundance, whether it be annually or biannually. Long term goal would be to have retreat space for fat camp. I need to come up with a better name than fat camp, but I like it turned on its head.

E

Elizabeth Melton 47:28

Yeah, I know, it still has that - my mind goes to movies from when we were kids, for sure. But are there any organizers or historical figures that you look up to and take inspiration from?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 47:56

There are many, but very few fat people. I will say Dolly Parton is a really valuable person for me, because she finds this way to embrace people of all kinds. There are lots of big things about her that she's had to deal with shame about. I mean, public shaming or public celebration of her body, and I think she's handled it well. So I would love to be like Dolly. I mean, she's been doing what she's doing for so long. I feel like she is a historical - even though she is a contemporary - she's a historical person. And then a peer of mine is Sonya Renee Taylor. She's a fat Black woman who wrote *The Body is Not an Apology*, and I just really admire the way that she has drawn people into this space. She writes from a spiritual but not explicitly Christian - I don't think she is Christian - perspective, and is a really valuable example for me of how to talk about spirituality in the context of bodies.

E

Elizabeth Melton 49:58

That's cool. Yeah, it's interesting, again, when we think of historical figures, there are a lot that may come to mind, but it does seem like it's more of an of-this-moment kind of thing, that we're actually in a space to be able to talk about fat liberation.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 50:14

Right, and that hasn't been an ongoing conversation.

E

Elizabeth Melton 50:23

So I want to be respectful of your time, and we're almost at an hour. So the the last big question is what advice do you have for future generations? And thinking about what your own reflections, your wisdom - I mean, as a writer, you are already doing that, leaving your voice for future generations. But what do you want to share with people who may be listening to this oral history decades from now? Feel free to take as much time as you need.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 51:02

Three things: You are not too much, you are enough, and you have the right to take up the space that you need. Those are my three words, three things.

E

Elizabeth Melton 51:24

Yeah, and I love your, "all bodies are good bodies."

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 51:29

Also that, too.

E

Elizabeth Melton 51:31

It just made a lot of sense, too when you were discussing your relationship with understanding the body and Christianity and that sort of thing.

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 51:43

I guess another thing for posterity is that I can say all bodies are good bodies, because in the tradition of Aristotle, I believe that a body is good when it fulfills its purpose. A thing is good when it fulfills its purpose. And the purpose of the human body is relationship with God and with others, so any body can have relationship with any body else. And that makes it good. So all bodies are good bodies.

E

Elizabeth Melton 52:21

Thank you so much. This has been really wonderful just to speak with you. Anything else that you wanted to address or mention?

A

Amanda Martinez Beck 52:33

No, I'm all talked out. This has been really great. Thank you, Elizabeth.

E

Elizabeth Melton 52:37

Yes, I'll stop the recording now.