

## **Elizabeth Melton**

**April 13, 2023**

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:00:02] All right. So today is the 13th of April, 2023. My name is Eleonora Anedda and I am IDCL oral historian and curriculum specialist. I'm here today with Elizabeth. Liz, how are you today?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:00:19] I'm good, thank you.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:00:22] Where are you joining the call from?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:00:24] I'm joining from Crumpler, North Carolina.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:00:28] All right. So I am located instead in Italy, Sardinia, Italy. And we're recording this interview for the Religions Texas archive. So Liz, just start off, would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood and where you grew up?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:00:47] Sure. So I grew up in northeast Texas in a town called Longview. I like to describe it - it's two hours east of Dallas and about an hour west of Shreveport, Louisiana. So it's very far east, and it's in a region that's called the Piney Woods. So this part of Texas, they call it northeast Texas or Deep East Texas, is very woodsy. There's tons of pine trees and things like that. So it's not what you typically think of when you think of magical Texas as all being part of the Western world and that sort of thing. It's very culturally southern, so it matches a lot of the rest of the southern United States in that way, while still being like distinctly Texan.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:01:40] But I grew up in Longview, and it's a place that my family had been for a while. My mom and my dad were both from Longview, and they actually went to the same high school but didn't know each other very well, which I always thought was very strange. They didn't know each other, but all of my grandparents also taught in the public school system in Longview. So we had a lot of ties to that area and that community. And the house that I grew up in was one that my parents built on some property that my grandfather owned. So they built it when my two older sisters were young. They didn't know at that time that they were gonna have a third kid.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:02:31] I came along, and so I lived in the same house my whole life, essentially. And we still have that house, we still have that property, and we have a farm as well. My dad's dad raised Shorthorn cattle, and so my dad helped also on the farm. In that sense, we were very quintessentially Texan. There was a very rural or agricultural setting that I grew up in because our house was essentially just in the middle of a cow pasture. So there were cows all around. I didn't grow up in a neighborhood or anything like that.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:03:10] So Granddaddy raised cows. He had chickens, and I was really young. And we'd go and pile in the truck with Daddy and go count the cows or help feed the cows. And there were ducks that stayed at the Red House, which is this really old Civil War two-bedroom little cabin that my grandfather moved to the farm property. So that was where we could go and check in and grab a Coke and feed the ducks, that sort of thing. It was a very cute and country space, pretty rural, even though Longview is not way out in the country, but it's definitely more rural than some of the more metropolitan areas of Texas.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:04:04] Well, that sounds wonderful. I'd love to know more about this. So what was a typical day like for you as a kid?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:04:14] So as a kid, again, I was the youngest of three girls. I had two older sisters, Ann and Emily. Ann's the oldest, and she was seven years older than me, and Emily was five years older. So there's a bit of an age gap. And again, I think because I grew up in a setting where everyone was a teacher - all of my grandparents had been teachers, my mom was a teacher, my dad was on the school board - we were very pro-school, very pro-public school. I don't remember this, but this is according to my mom that when the school year would start, I would always be really sad when I was too young to go to school, because my sisters would get to go, and I had to stay home. In some ways, I guess that's maybe atypical because I'm not sure tons of kids always really, really want to go to school. But that was my experience. I really wanted to go to school.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:05:13] And then when I did eventually start public school, it was great. So many people knew me and knew my family either because the teachers have had one of my sisters, or they knew my parents or my grandparents. And so it was a very community feeling going to school. A lot of kids, if you see your teacher out in the real world, you're like, "Oh my god, they exist not in the classroom." But I always knew that was the case because so many of my mom's friends were teachers. We went to church with a lot of people who also were my teachers. So my primary school, which is where I went from kindergarten to second grade, was called Doris McQueen Primary School. And I actually knew Doris McQueen really well because she went to my church. And my elementary school was Mozelle Johnston Elementary - which Mozelle always was a bizarre first name to me, but that's a woman's name, Mozelle. And my grandmother knew Mozelle Johnston. I only knew that she was this real human or something. So it was a very different experience, having all of these deep connections to this long history of education in the area.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:06:45] So I was always a really good student, a teacher's pet type. But I would go to school most days. And then since all of my grandparents lived in town, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Grandma and Granddaddy Jenkins - so that's my mom's parents, their names are Doris and Eldoras. It's a ridiculous but adorable set of names, Doris and Eldoras. They would pick me up every Tuesday and Thursday, and then I'd go to their house after school. And grandmother Melton, my dad's mom Lou Ann Melton, she would pick me up every Wednesday after school. And her house was actually right next to the elementary school and the middle school that she'd also gone to.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:07:41] So this is where it gets a little difficult, just describing things. But so there's this community block. There was a more rural area. It was not in the Longview city limits, but it was in a community called Judson, Texas, which is part of Longview, Texas, essentially, but outside of the bounds of the official city at the time. And my grandmother's house, we'll say, was close to the corner, which is where a middle school was. Then there was a little field. And next to her house was the house she grew up in, which is where her brother and sister-in-law lived. So Nancy and Bill lived there. Then there was a bigger pasture, and the next house was her other sister Lynelle lived there. And then if you go backwards, so next to that middle school is where the elementary school was. And on the far side of the elementary school was the other sister and her husband, Woodie and JJ.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:08:47] So this whole part of my family all lived in this corner sandwiching and wrapping around two of the public schools that I went to the elementary

school and then my sister went to that middle school. She would actually walk home to grandmother's house sometimes after school. Granddaddy had cut a little gate door in the fence, and so she could just go walk through the fence that way. But I didn't realize how unique that was, that I had so many of my family living in my same town, that I saw both sets of grandparents multiple times a week. And with my dad's parents, particularly, so Grady and Lou Ann, it was really grandmother Lou Ann Mackey Melton that her dad owned a lot of that property that was right around the schools.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:09:50] And it was his family, the Mackeys, that moved to Longview right after the Civil War in the United States. And they founded - their family and some other families that came from Alabama and Georgia - started a church that was Alpine Presbyterian Church, and that's the church I grew up in. So the church is like a family heirloom. And all of those people that I just described living in that little block, I can also tell you exactly where they sat in church every Sunday, and we all sat as a family unit in the back three rows of the church on the left side. And then there were some other people in the church congregation as well that were my grandmother's cousins. They sat in different places. There's Doris McQueen, who I mentioned earlier, too, who'd been part of the public school system and stuff.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:10:49] So I had a very unique experience kind of having this very - in some ways it was a very rural, old country upbringing just because we had those roots to that part of town and to the religious, spiritual community that I grew up in. But I didn't really understand that at the time. So for me, a lot of my relationship to going to church is very much about community, and it's very much about family. And yeah, so we definitely went to church every single day. I mean, not every single day, but every single Sunday. That was another thing as a young kid, once I did start going to school, I was a little disappointed that church didn't let out for the summer too [laughs]. But we were always at church. My dad was in the choir. My mom did hand bells. And everybody, since it was a really small church congregation, everyone stepped into some sort of leadership role sometimes. So the women were doing just as much as the men at the church and that sort of thing. But that's a little bit more about what everyday life was like.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:12:09] I wanted to ask you about church, so that was going to be my next question. But I also wanted to say that I found really interesting that you said that when you were little, you didn't realize that it was a bit unique, that you had so many family members all so close to you that lived in the same town. And actually, I may be wrong, but I think you're the first person that I interview who's based in the US, has grown up in the US, who has shared this kind of situation with me. And I've always felt when living here, I mean, I have a very similar situation to yours. And I've always thought it was the standard. And then when I realized that that was not the case for everyone, I was sort of like, "I don't know what I would do without my family. I would be a completely different person." So I just wanted to say that. About church, your whole family was very involved in church. What was the denomination of the church?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:13:30] Sure. So this again, it goes back to some of that same family lineage. So it was Alpine Presbyterian Church, so we were Presbyterians. And again, it was through that Mackey and Henderson line of the family. So it very much has those Scottish roots, which is where the Presbyterian - it's the Church of Scotland. But it was also really - this is silly because I forget about it growing up. East Texas is definitely part of the Bible Belt in the southern US. Texas in general, I think, is. But East Texas has that very similar southern deep South feel. And so a lot of people that I grew up with were Baptists, or were maybe nondenominational in some way. And in those churches, it's the

common practice that you get baptized a little bit older, as an adult, or you have your moment where you get saved, and then you go get baptized. But Presbyterians are some of the ones that are baptized as infants.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:14:47] It was hard to understand the differences between Christian denominations as a kid, because the Presbyterian church that I grew up in wasn't as evangelical. We weren't taught to always witness. People weren't always invited down to the front to accept Jesus. It was just like we were there, and we believed in Jesus and God, and that was it. And I remember once my dad - eventually, once I got older and was able to understand or articulate some of my confusion as a kid, my dad, I think he was asked one time to share his - oh, what's the term? It's like your own journey in Christianity or whatever, your witness statement or something. I don't know what it's called. But he was asked to share it, and he was like, "Well, it didn't hit me like a rock. It was just always the way it was." And so that's very much the way that I was raised in a Christian faith. And it was like, "This is who we are. This is what we do." And it was never in question, like, "Do you believe this?" It was just what was expected, I guess.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:16:02] But again, because it was so tied to community, it was so tied to family, even though there are parts of religion that can be really abrasive or upsetting, it's still something that I find comfort in even now, just because it does have that community tie for me. But also it's interesting because the Presbyterian Church, particularly PC USA - so there's different sects are different versions of Presbyterianism, of course, in the US - and the Presbyterian Church USA is the organization that's a bit more liberal in Texas, which is really interesting because my family was not liberal, particularly growing up. Both of my parents are very conservative, very traditional in a lot of ways.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:17:01] But as a whole, PC USA, we allow women to be ordained. We allow gay people to be ordained, and you are allowed to be married in the church and that sort of thing. And obviously that's something, that official voting or whatever has happened more in the last twenty, thirty years or whatever. But that's something that I think my sisters and I are really proud of, because we still kind of identify as Presbyterians and PC USA folks, and very much identify more with this progressive idea of what Christianity is and a more accepting version of the faith. So we feel lucky in that sense that we grew up in this community. And again, because I mentioned before too, that the women were as active in leadership as the men were in a lot of ways when I was growing up, and in part it was because the congregation was so small. If the women didn't help, there wouldn't be enough people to do everything.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:18:05] But there have been a few times, too, once I was older, in college and stopped going to church, but would try every now and then. I went to some different Presbyterian churches, and only the men were doing things, and a very different - it wasn't PC USA, but it was a different Presbyterian church. But it was just very interesting to me, because I had that sense of equal work and equal leadership, I think, was really important to me growing up. And again, it was one of those things that you didn't realize was impacting you necessarily until you get older and had a bit more perspective that that wasn't everyone's experience. So I was really grateful for that aspect of the Presbyterian church that I grew up in.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:18:58] And overall, it sounds like you had, can I say a fun time growing up, as a little kid in general in Longview, but also in church and at school, right?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:19:13] Yeah. Yeah, I would say it was a fun time. I'm trying to think. I think I didn't realize how sheltered I was, how lucky I was, how taken care of I was. Because it wasn't just even my parents, but it was all my grandparents. And having multiple meals a week at someone else's house. We really did have a bigger sense of community, of who was able to take care of us, and particularly because of the church, I was really close to a lot of my great aunts and my great uncles that lived close by, so it's like I had all these extra grandparents as well. I would say it was a really comforting upbringing.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:20:07] How long did you live in Longview for?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:20:11] I've lived in Longview off and on, even as an adult. But I was there definitely all the way from birth through high school, and again, going to all the same schools that, either my sisters had been to, the same high school my parents had been to, and my grandparents taught at. So in a place where I felt very rooted. And then I went to Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, and was there for four years doing my undergrad. A big part of why I went to Texas A&M is that my dad had been an Aggie. So Texas A&M is a very traditional - "tradition" is their big key word for everything. There's a tradition for every day of the week, for every activity. It started off as an all White male military university. So it has a very old White man military sense of tradition as well. But so I was the first woman in my family to go to Texas A&M. My dad and all of his male cousins had gone to A&M. Two of his uncles had been to A&M and that sort of thing. So there was a sense of family there, but it was a little different.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:21:36] I was there, and then I moved home to Longview for a year, and then I went back to A&M for my master's degree. And then after my master's, that's when things swept me off to North Carolina for my doctoral work on my PhD. But even still, I've always been really back and forth with Longview and spent at least part of each year in Longview, but at different times, too. Even when the pandemic hit, I moved back to Longview for a while, and that sort of thing. And I did my research, my doctoral research is in Longview, so even when I'm not living in Longview, I still feel like it's home, and that it's part of me.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:22:26] Yeah, I can tell. I can feel that you're really - I knew that you did your doctoral research on Longview. But now that I hear you talking about it and about your childhood and your family, I can really feel like you have a soft spot. I wanted to ask you, what is your relationship to Texas. I don't know if you can speak to the whole of Texas or if you just want to maybe just speak about East Texas, whatever you interpret the question.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:23:17] Yeah. Well, there's a lot of potentially mixed feelings, particularly when we're talking about all of Texas, because, I mean personally, I've hardly spent any time at all in West Texas, so I almost have no feelings at all towards West Texas. I've spent more time in the Dallas, DFW area, and then obviously my time in College Station. I've been in different parts of Texas. And there's the Texas you know and love, and then there's also this level of Texas politics and the reality of everyday Texas, which that's where some mixed feelings come in, because it's hard to love a place so much but then be really frustrated or overwhelmed at times with politics.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:24:10] And one really simple example, obviously, that I've brought up over and over again is how closely tied my family is to public education and how important public education is to us. And yet public education in Texas, it's getting harder

and harder for teachers. And I know this is true across the US, but a lot of policies that Texas sets in place often end up getting enacted in other parts of the country. And so it's hard to love Texas and still know that there's so much you wish you could change, or there's so many things you wish you could improve on.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:24:52] But I used to think if I ever had a genie grant me one wish, what would I ask for? And part of myself was like, "Well, I would ask the genie to fix public education in Texas." Because then if you're able to fix public education in Texas, it'll grow beyond that. Of course, if it's a genie, I don't know why you would just stop with Texas. Just fix everything. But that was still always my thought or my motivation. If we could fix this one thing or make it really strong, then we could do so much to change and improve things. So that was what motivated me even when I started my dissertation research and that sort of thing. It was like, "Okay, well, I'm not sure I can fix all of public education in Texas, but maybe I can learn a little bit more about this or do a little bit of my own part to think about, what is this history of Texas and its relationship to education?"

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:26:14] And while I was doing my doctoral work, I took an anti-racism training that was really powerful. And it was a full two-day training, and it was the first time I'd been exposed to the logic of anti-racism and the logic of systematically demonstrating and unpacking policies and practices that had set the world up to be inequitable, and how racism was developed, particularly in an American context. That was really impactful to me, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to get a whole lot of East Texans to be able to commit to a two-day training to talk about - particularly thinking about White East Texans - about when we don't see color, what the problems are with that, what the issues are that maybe we're not aware of, how systematic racism has been built into the US and to our everyday life and culture.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:27:26] I didn't think I could get folks to sit for two days to do an anti-racism training. But my other background and training is in theater and performance. And so I thought, "Well, I can't get them to sit in a room for two days, but I could get them to come to a show. I could get them to come to a performance that also is dealing with these themes and these ideas." At first I had a whole different doctoral project. I had a whole different dissertation in mind, and I was like, "I'll just do this one summer." But then particularly, this is when things were happening in the US with so many Black Lives Matter protests and different things, and as things are heating up in the US, I was like, "No, this is more important, and this is something I could certainly give this much time and attention to."

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:28:16] So I shifted and did my entire doctoral work on public school desegregation in Longview in my hometown. And specifically in the school district that I grew up in, that my parents grew up in, my grandparents taught in. So it was all very home-focused, very personal. And so I collected some ethnographic interviews that used oral history methods. And I then was able to turn those interviews into a play. So the final play that I did included ten different excerpts from ten different people that had been teachers or students. Who else? Teachers, students, parents of students who were in Longview during public school desegregation. And I was able to do that performance in Longview in 2017, I think. And it was really cool. It was very powerful.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:29:24] And then there's a second narrative going along with this as well, because my dad actually passed away my senior year of college, and it was very unexpected. He was only fifty-five. He died from a heart attack. And at that time, because it was so unexpected and the high school had been building a new performing arts center,

because he'd been on the school board for so many years, and he started a race relations committee in Longview as well, based on his time on the school board. So after he passed away, they decided to honor him and name the new performing arts center after my dad. And so that all happened that same year that he passed away in 2010.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:30:12] But so when I did the performance, I did it in the Mickey Melton Performing Arts Center at Longview High School. So again, that was also part of the strategy though, because again, people aren't gonna come to sit in an anti-racism training for two days, but they're definitely going to come listen to Elizabeth Melton talk about her dad's impact on race and public school education in Longview. So again, it was using that positionality as well to strengthen that narrative and strengthen the draw of who would be in the audience that day.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:30:52] How was it for you to perform there?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:30:56] It was good. The only bad thing about - and this is logistical thing - is that performing arts space is huge. It's a really, really big performing arts center. And there weren't enough people to fill up all the seats. It would have been better in a more intimate space, and so that was frustrating. But overall, I mean, it was really powerful to have done it in Longview. We had talkbacks after each performance where I invited different people from the community to sit with me on stage and people that had known my dad or had ties to the public school system then, as well, at that time. And so that was really powerful to be able to have those conversations afterwards and be able to unpack further and address some of the themes that came up. And so it was really special in that sense because I also had some good friends that were just people I'd grown up with or people I didn't know would come to the show who came and said really sweet things afterwards. So it was really special.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:32:12] Yeah, thank you for sharing that. I also wanted to put all things together because now I know you, and I think I'm taking for granted a few things. So when you mentioned education at the beginning and that you had such close-to-home connections to education, I was like, "Oh yes, this makes sense because [inaudible]." And I realized that we didn't share that or put the two things together in the recording. And the other thing that I wanted to say is, do you want to talk a little bit about your connection with theater and performance as well? Because I realize we didn't talk about your PhD and what you were doing exactly.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:33:14] Yeah, and I can put it, too, in a bit more life story context as well. So the first play I ever did, I was Lucy in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. At Mozelle Johnston Elementary when I was in fifth grade. And I think it's because I was already the really mean and sarcastic little girl. It worked, really. It was a bit of typecasting. And I had the classic Lucy haircut. But so that was the first play I ever did, and I really loved it. That was one thing that was surprising. After fifth grade, I started making choices based on pursuing theater and performance. And that was the first time - well, that's not totally true, because both of my sisters have been dancers and been in band. And a lot of how I understood myself was in comparison with my sisters, who were both very similar, but I was also very athletic. I did a lot of sports, which my dad loved because he finally had an athlete.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:34:27] But yeah, somewhere the theater bug bit me, I guess. And so in middle school, I went in part to the middle school I chose to go to, it was in part because they had a theater class that I could take. In high school, I was in every production. I was

in the musicals. I was in the one act plays. I was the theater kid. And when I went to college then as an undergrad, that's one of the things that if I really wanted to do theater, I shouldn't have gone to Texas A&M University because it's an agricultural school. It's not the liberal arts school. It's not known for the liberal arts or any of those things. But they did have a theater department, a theater program. And so I went back and forth, but eventually where I ended up was I double majored in English and theater.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:35:30] I think I was a junior when I was taking the theater history classes that were required of majors. And these were taught by Kirsten Pullen. And it was one of the first times that I realized that I could have a future in theater without having to become an artist or only a practitioner. I didn't have to try to move to Chicago. I didn't have to try to move to New York and try to make it work, because that was really overwhelming to me. And I just couldn't, that was not my style. But then I also didn't just want to be a theater teacher necessarily. I didn't just want to teach high school theater or something like that. But so in taking these theater history classes, they're introducing us to theory, critical historical framings of understanding plays and things, I began to understand like, "Oh, I can go to graduate school. I can go to grad school, and I can study theater history in a different way." And so that's what set me on the path.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:36:40] At first I wasn't sure that I wanted a PhD, so I just got a masters, and it was a masters in performance studies, which is what they were offering at Texas A&M at the time. I applied to some other programs, but that's where I was accepted for the masters. And so with performance studies, it's a bit broader of an understanding of performance. It's not only theater. Theatricality and theater performance is certainly part of it, but we're also thinking about how performance is a part of everyday life. So it's a bit more anthropological, and we think about ritual and play as much as artistic expression. So it could be theater performances, dance, movement, orchestra, all different types of performance. So it's a much bigger picture.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:37:34] But within this world of performance studies, there was still this really strong tradition that had been growing and developing since the seventies and eighties, of doing oral history performance and performing oral histories and using performance as a mode of research to continue these other types of research and explore them in a different way, in a way that was more embodied. And that really, really resonated with me. And so once I was a masters student, that's when I applied to my PhD program and knew that I wanted to do that kind of work. I wanted to do academic research that also had room for doing performance, that had room for this kind of creative expression that would allow me to engage in and research questions in different ways. So it wasn't all just asking a question, doing historical research, archival work, and writing it up, but it was more like expression and embodiment, what is the space between all of these things? And how does this all impact our understanding of life and culture and everything else. So that's the long version, maybe.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:38:55] That's perfect. And do you want to maybe bridge the gap between your PhD - if I got it correctly, you got your PhD, and then COVID hit, right?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:39:09] Yes. Yeah, my PhD, I submitted my dissertation the exact same week that the whole world shut down. So I submitted my dissertation to my committee, and it was really crummy on a personal level because I'd already been existing in a type of lockdown, just writing, revising, not going out. And then as soon as I was able to rejoin the world, the whole world literally shut down. And normally that would be a hyperbolic statement, but in this case, we know it's not. It was bizarre.



**Elizabeth Melton** [00:39:55] But yeah, so I'd been planning on that next year, I wanted to take some time. I'd purposely not been applying for academic jobs right away that first year, but I thought I would have the year after I finished to work on my performance. I had a few dates lined up and a few things that I was gonna do my performances at different places. And then, of course, with the pandemic, everything got canceled. And so it was a bit unrealistic for me to stay in North Carolina for a while. So that's when I went back to Texas for a little bit and mostly was just unemployed during the pandemic and applying for jobs, which eventually I was successful in getting a fellowship with IDCL, so that was a beautiful [laughs] development.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:40:59] And do you want to just say what you've been doing since then and a bit - because now you've also moved back again to North Carolina.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:41:09] Yes. Well, I'll say it's a bit of back and forth, so it's a little bit messy, that space in between finishing the PhD and where I am today, because it was that weird in-between time of being part of the pandemic. So everything feels like it was on hiatus in some ways. Right before I left North Carolina to go back to Texas at the pandemic, I reconnected with one of my good friends from graduate school, and he and I started dating. And it was really terrible timing in some senses, because he was living in the mountains in North Carolina, and he was an assistant professor at Appalachian State University. So he and I ended up dating, doing this back and forth thing between Texas and North Carolina during the pandemic.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:42:12] Part of that time as well was when I was in Texas during that time, was when the big Texas freeze hit. It was that February, and that January in 2021, I'd been in North Carolina with Andrew. And again, that's in the mountains in North Carolina. So it's wintry, there's snow, there's blustery winds. You expect it to be that kind of weather. But then I had to come back to Texas for a few months because my mom was having knee replacement surgery. So I was gonna be there for her and help her with her post-op time. But when I was packing, it was too far in advance to know that this freak snowstorm was coming. So I left all of my winter gear in North Carolina and came back to Texas thinking it'd be normal seventy, sixty degree Texas February. And then, of course, it wasn't.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:43:15] My mom had her surgery. I don't know exactly what day of the week it was. We'll say it was a Tuesday. She had her surgery that day. We spent the night in the hospital, and the next day she went home, which was really good, because that night and the next day is when the snowstorm hit. So we'd literally just got back to my mom's house before this big snowstorm. And so all that time when we were getting ready for her surgery, I was running around to all these different stores trying to find my dog a coat [laughs], cause I'd also left her sweaters and dog coat in North Carolina.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:43:57] But in February, in Texas, all of the winter stuff was put away, swimsuits were already out in all of the stores, so I couldn't find anything anywhere. So I ended up buying a toddler sweatshirt for my dog, but I rolled up the sleeves and used the little hair tie on her back to keep it from dragging under her belly because she's a beagle, and she does love the snow, but she does get cold after trudging her whole body through the snow after a little bit. So she looked really cute in her little haphazard sweatshirt when we would go for walks during the snowstorm.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:44:37] And I grabbed just a few extra warm things at a Walmart. And then I had some of my mom's clothes on when we'd go for walks. And it was just a big,

crazy, unexpected snowstorm. But in that sense, it was almost maybe more realistic because a lot of Texans also didn't have the appropriate gear for that type of weather, so a lot of just making do with what you have. Those first few days after my mom got back from the hospital with her new knee were really stressful, because I was just managing her meds and feeding her and all that stuff.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:45:21] But we were also dealing with rolling blackouts during the snowstorm. So I would try to get everything set up before the electricity would come on because you never knew when the electricity would come back on. But if we were gonna cook anything or warm anything up, I would have to just jump on it as soon as the lights came on and the power came on, because it could stay on for twenty minutes, it could stay on for an hour and a half. You just didn't know. But it was lucky. Dealing with rolling blackouts was better than no electricity at all.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:45:58] But it was also very stressful, because when you're in the hospital, they're like, "The first seventy-two hours is really important to getting your range of motion back after you have a knee replacement surgery. And so she was supposed to have a physical therapist come pretty much that very next day. But the physical therapist couldn't get there for three or four days, because there was so much snow. And I would try to encourage her to do her exercises. But she was in a lot of pain, and so she wasn't moving her knee very much. And I was stressed about it because I'm like, "Well, I'm not this kind of doctor. I don't know how to help you."

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:46:39] But yeah, so that was a little wild. But that was part of that pandemic time, part of that transition time. Eventually later towards that summer, I did move back to North Carolina, and now I live in the mountains in North Carolina but spend that time going back and forth. Yeah, so I guess that was in February. Then that summer I moved back to North Carolina, and that September I started working with IDCL, working remotely. So that's that gets us to where we are today. Although now I'm married, so that all happened in there too.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:47:24] And actually, I'm gonna ask this because it's just interesting for me. So you said that you grew up in Longview and your whole family was there, and now you're living in North Carolina. And of course, you have Andrew, but your family still in Longview, right?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:47:47] Yeah.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:47:47] And so what is that like for you? You have this huge, deep connection with this place, and you're living somewhere else. Does that affect you in any way? How do you feel about it?

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:48:03] Yeah, I mean, I think it's interesting, and it's complicated, because I know my sisters and I all have this connection to Longview. My mom does still have the house in Longview, and she lives in Longview, but she also recently bought a house in Frisco, Texas, which is where my middle sister lives. And so that's in the Dallas area. And that's about two, three hours from Longview, which in Texas is close [laughs]. Not that far away.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:48:40] I think it's interesting, because when I was growing up, my Aunt Jeanna - she's the only - my dad was an only child, and my mom only had one sister. So she was my only primary aunt, and we didn't have any first cousins. So Jeanna lived in

Garland, which is also in this Dallas area. And so she was the person who was two hours away, which did seem far away, because we'd see her, she'd come in for holidays, we'd see her several times a year, but not the way I was seeing everybody else multiple times a week. And now it's a little disappointing because I know that my family, now we match the patterns of other people, where you have to travel a little bit more to see your family.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:49:32] Part of why my mom got a house in Frisco is because that's where two of her grandkids are, Laney and Lily. Emily's kids live in Frisco, and so she can see them a little bit more often now. But then my oldest sister Ann, she was the one that - I don't know if it's an adventurous spirit or what - but she's the one that after college moved away and never came back. So she lived in Louisville, Kentucky. She lived in Boston, Massachusetts. She lived in New York City. She met her husband in Boston, then they moved to New York together. When they had their first daughter Rilke, they actually moved to Bismarck, North Dakota, which is where Ryan's family is from. So in some ways it's similar to Longview, because it's also a lot of oil country. It's similar in some ways, and it's about the same size as Longview, even though it's the capital of North Dakota.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:50:34] There, part of why they moved to North Dakota, is because that's where Ryan's family is. So their kids get to see their one of their grandparents all the time. And they have that support there. So it's interesting, because - yeah, I can't imagine. Andrew and I don't plan on having kids, but if we did, it would be really difficult for me to imagine that without being close to grandparents or something, just because that was so much a part of my everyday life and my existence as a kid. But I don't know. Now it's interesting, because I've been in North Carolina, I guess, about ten years, even though part of that time I've been going back and forth and been in Texas. And so even though I do feel like a North Carolinian to some extent, I'm still more of a Texan, and I still feel more of that connection to home.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:51:40] And that's when Andrew and I got married in May. We had the ceremony in Longview, which was kind of bizarre having all these people fly to Longview and all of his friends who've never been there or anything like that. But part of why we did that was so that we could have a two-day celebration and have the ceremony on Saturday, and then that Sunday we had a big brunch, hang out day, eat barbecue and stuff at my family's farm at the Red House that I mentioned before. So it is, it's still a big part of me. I've gotten really used to going back and forth between North Carolina and Texas now. I guess it's good and lucky that Andrew likes to drive, because we drive back and forth and take our dog. And he's actually from Auburn, Alabama, which in some ways is right in the middle between where we live now in North Carolina and Texas. So we go, and we stop, and we stay with his dad a few days, and then we'll keep going on to Texas. And then when we come back, we stop and stay with his family again and then come back home.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:52:58] So we still have those family connections. They just have a very different shape to when it was when I was growing up. But again, it's that love-hate relationship with Longview, because there are things that I love about it, but it is still it's still stuck in some conservative confusion. Things aren't as equitable as I would like them to be. Certainly still having my middle sister now is the one who's still a public school teacher. She teaches art school, or she teaches art at an elementary school. It's hard to watch her struggling with the state of public education in Texas and all the expectations on teachers and how unrealistic it is. So there's a lot of things still that I would like to change and improve, but then there's that sense of being at home. When I think of the farm and just all the family time I've had back in Longview.

**Eleonora Anedda** [00:54:23] I don't know if there's anything that maybe I haven't had the chance to ask or something that maybe we haven't talked about that feels important to share.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:54:37] I'm trying to think, because there's - particularly when it comes to Texas for me, it is so deeply tied to this sense of, "What is my hometown? Where am I from?" And there's the academic side of me that could go more into the critical analysis of my relationship to Texas. That's some of what I did in the dissertation as well, was thinking more critically about my positionality as a White woman in Texas, as a White woman whose family owns property in Texas, who's the great-granddaughter of a property owner who owned the local cotton gin, had a lot of sharecroppers working on his property. And so a lot of that is coded. I mean, some of it's not that coded, but sharecroppers in East Texas, particularly in the early 20th century, were all definitely Black.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:55:46] And so there's a lot of those relationships about power imbalances and the fact that my family was at the top of that power pyramid in that time and in that context. That also complicates even my own relationship to East Texas. And particularly my relationship to some of the property that we own, because I know that we were able to accumulate property, because most of that property was bought in the 20th century when it would have been an advantage and much easier for a White person to be purchasing property and maintaining it and holding onto it. So there's definitely those underlining politics that I'm aware of, and that also inform my relationship to it.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:56:46] One of the things that has become part of my personal politics and my personal Texas-ness even, is trying to be really open about that and being really direct about and recognizing these power imbalances and how they play a part in my life, and choosing to then purposefully and actively work against these racist structures and things, and trying to find ways to hold space for the experiences of people of color, to hold space for folks that - again, like what we do with oral history. For folks whose stories are not being told, to find ways to tell those stories and to find ways to help others hear those stories, so that someone's not just speaking into the void, but speaking in a way that someone will hear them and get to change their own understanding or perspective.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:57:55] So that's definitely something that's very much guiding - there's that personal relationship that's just all warm and fuzzy with my hometown, with my family, with Texas. And then there's this other underlining, more critical narrative as well that I just hold both of these together and hold space for them to coexist. And because it is, it's challenging growing up and learning to process what that relationship is. This is one thing too, that I think is really interesting or important is when I was - I feel like I was probably in fourth grade, and I read a book called *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*. And it's about this young Black girl growing up in the South, and her family owns property. But folks in the community are often trying to take their property away, raising taxes and things so that the family can't afford it. And then all of her friends are sharecroppers who live in one of those situations where the property owner that they work for is really taking advantage of them and is this White villain in the narrative.

**Elizabeth Melton** [00:59:20] And it was always really interesting because I was able to resonate and connect with her, even though she's a Black girl in a very different time period and situation from me. There were those rural aspects, those family aspects, those connections to the land that really resonated with me. But I also knew that because of my great grandfather and these other things, that really, if I was in this story, I would be

affiliated with the villain. That's really my positionality in this narrative. This fourth-grader Elizabeth trying to understand what that means. And I think for a long time, I didn't totally understand that, or maybe it went towards those feelings of White guilt, of not understanding what that could be. But that planted the seed that I followed as an adult to get to what that tension was and what that misunderstanding was, even for this little fourth-grader that knew something else was going on, that knew something was complicated between all these different relationships.

**Elizabeth Melton** [01:00:36] And it is interesting because a lot of how I've come to some of these - a lot of how I've learned to be either an ally, being anti-racist, lots of different things, have been through these stories that have been told from the perspective of Black women, that create some tension in my understanding or reflection, because then my whole masters was about *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. And again, I understood and connected these feelings of community that were being represented, but again, very much outside of that story as a White woman. Not my story at all. Having these tensions between understanding certain aspects of Southern-ness, womanhood, and family, community, but then also what this power dynamic is between, particularly, White folks and Black folks in the South. But it's a lot more complicated Than that, too. Yeah, so that's this other narrative that's running underneath all of my love for Texas and my own personal journey with coming to understand who I am as a Texan.

**Eleonora Anedda** [01:01:55] Yeah, absolutely. And thank you for unpacking it that way. I just I wanted to ask you, you know that this interview is going to be archived, and so it will live in our wonderful archive. So is there anything you would like to say to future you or just a message that you'd like to shoot into the future?

**Elizabeth Melton** [01:02:23] Yeah. I mean, it's a little scary to think about the future. Honestly, we don't know what things will look like in ten, forty, or a hundred years from now. So I guess the thing that I would hope is that people continue to take care of these special spaces and these places that are more than just land or are just more than a town. It's a community, and it's a place where people live their lives. And so I think that it's really important that we continue to nurture these spaces and let them be what they are. They don't all have to be Instagram-perfect [laughs]. It doesn't have to follow the newest trend, but it can be that weird little moment of regionality that's distinct to what it is.

**Elizabeth Melton** [01:03:30] And yeah, I just find that also I would say to future versions of myself or future - if I were to say something to my nieces, I think too, it would be that when you come across those books or those movies or those stories that rub something or create that tension, that create that moment of confusion, to just hold onto it and let it be what it is for a while. But let that guide you as you go forward and see what else you can learn. Because if there's that little bit of confusion, probably in your head, then there's probably something bigger going on that you can figure out, even if you don't figure it out right away. It might take you ten, fifteen years, but you'll get there.

**Eleonora Anedda** [01:04:25] All right, that's wonderful. So just before we stop the recording, is there anything else you'd like to share?

**Elizabeth Melton** [01:04:40] I think I'm good for now, but thank you.

**Eleonora Anedda** [01:04:44] Okay, so then I'll go ahead and stop the recording.