

# SHADES OF BELONGING:

## THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND RELIGION IN SHAPING UTAH IMMIGRANTS' INTEGRATION

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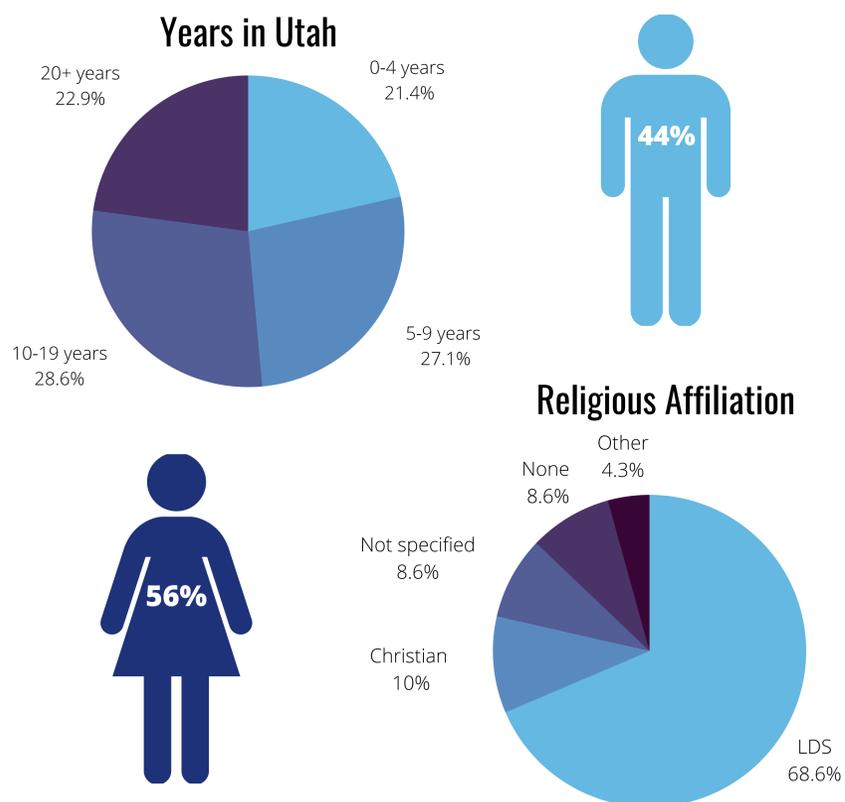
### BACKGROUND

There has been significant growth in Utah's non-White population over the past half-century. 1 of every 11 Utah residents is an immigrant, and refugees make up 2% of the state population. Given the history of early Mormons migrating to Utah to escape persecution, Utah state and LDS Church policies have been inclusive of immigrants and refugees. However, while the early LDS Church was welcoming of all races and ethnicities, by the 1850s it made concerted efforts to (re)establish its Whiteness in response to media/politicians characterizing it as non-White due to its racial inclusiveness and practice of polygamy. These efforts included the priesthood and temple ban on Black members. While the ban was lifted in 1978, the race-based policies of exclusion promoted anti-Black ways of thinking that remain deeply rooted in Utah culture today.

This legacy combines with the anti-Black and White supremacist history and legacy of US immigration laws to create a system in Utah in which Whiteness is "normal" and non-Whiteness is an undesirable aberration from the norm. Given Utah's unique religious, social, and cultural relationship to immigration, we use this case to ask: how do race, religion, and White supremacist ideologies shape integration among immigrants?

### METHODS

The analysis presented is based on interviews conducted by student researchers. From March 2019 to November 2020, they conducted 70 interviews with immigrants from a variety of countries. Those interviewed have lived in the US for at least 5 years and in Utah for at least 2 years. Each interviewer did 1-2 interviews, and they were conducted both in person and virtually. Interviewees participating in the study completed a brief questionnaire and a semi-structured, open-ended interview lasting roughly one hour. The interviews were all transcribed by the interviewers and then analyzed to examine perceptions of integration among immigrants living in Utah.



### WHITE/WHITE-PASSING LDS IMMIGRANTS

#### MOST BELONGING

Skin color and LDS church membership brings automatic inclusion in Utah

*"I've realized that because I am fair--my skin is light--I have not experienced that same discrimination as peers from [my] country."*  
- Alejandra, Ecuador

### NON-WHITE LDS IMMIGRANTS

Fluctuating sense of incomplete inclusion based on different social and cultural settings

*"You have to work harder to be included [...] just because of your color."*  
- Mary, Ecuador

### WHITE NON-LDS IMMIGRANTS

*"It's because of the culture, too, at church. People are very judgmental."*  
- Desi, Chile

*"I think, in all, that's been the hardest thing--just trying to live in a place that you want to call home, but [...] they don't let you call it home."*  
- Marco, Argentina

### NON-WHITE NON-LDS IMMIGRANTS

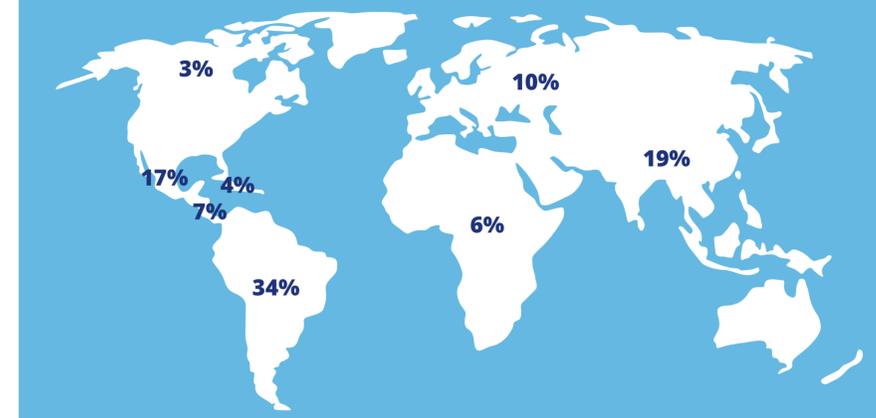
#### LEAST BELONGING

Exclusion because of racism, micro-aggressions, and judgments

*"Their attitude would change or they wouldn't want to talk anymore or kept their distance because I wasn't [Mormon]. [...] I felt like people didn't accept me just because I wasn't in the same church as they were."*  
- Alexa, Dominican Republic



### Interviewee Geographic Region of Origin



### FINDINGS

- Whiteness:** For White/White-passing interviewees, skin color brought automatic inclusion. This was sometimes a struggle because, as Alexandra from Finland put it, **"on the outside it looked like I was perfectly assimilated, but I really wasn't."** A number of White/White-passing interviewees realized their own light-skinned privilege upon coming to the U.S. and observed how darker-skinned people—even peers from their same country—were treated differently. Many interviewees found that Whiteness is equivalent to belonging in Utah.
- Non-Whiteness:** Non-White immigrants experience discrimination because of their skin color and often receive such treatment from people in all positions, regardless of authority. Non-White immigrants experience many fears and frustrations following such encounters which lead them to feeling ignored and undervalued, ultimately making them feel like they do not belong. Interviewees describe these experiences as stemming almost exclusively from skin-color-based racism.
- Blackness:** Less than 2% of Utah's population is Black, and immigrants/refugees make up a higher percentage of Utah's Black population than the overall U.S. Black population. This means that racism and xenophobia intersect for much of Utah's Black population. Emanuel from Haiti said **"people automatically look at me differently because [...] I'm African-American."** We find that colorism is a predominant form of racism in Utah, and Black interviewees' experiences with racism in Utah suggest a more constant and heightened experience of othering and exclusion compared to other interviewees of color.
- Church participation:** Utah has a large population of people in the Mormon faith, and many members of the LDS faith find belonging through their church membership. For those who were church members before moving to the US, the church provided a **"familiar setting"** (Phil, Argentina) and an **"instant connection"** (Andres, Peru). Some would attribute their sense of community to the LDS church because of the congregations many immigrants are a part of. Not all members feel the LDS church helped with their feelings of belonging. For some, participation in Church meetings and interactions with Church leaders and members resulted in additional experiences of exclusion, often because of explicitly racist comments and actions from other church members.
- Non-church participation:** For other immigrants in Utah who have no affiliation with the LDS Church, the insularity of Mormon culture leads to their automatic social exclusion in many settings, accompanied by pressure to accept baptism and official church membership as the only way to find true inclusion. Part of the discomfort with Mormon culture comes from the constant pressure to fully, officially embrace it. And if one doesn't ever fully embrace Mormonism, many immigrants feel excluded and judged.

### CONCLUSION

Both structural racial inequality and institutional cultural inequality have contributed to a hierarchy of belonging for immigrants in Utah. Based on our research, feeling a sense of belonging in the community is affected by both skin color and religion. We find that White or White-passing LDS members feel included while non-White and/or non-LDS members feel excluded. The LDS church is an example of the power religious and other institutions have in cultivating both feelings of belonging and feelings of isolation. Our study demonstrates that institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, need to construct policies that promote a culture of inclusion.

Based on the manuscript, "Shades of Belonging: The Intersection of Race and Religion in Shaping Utah Immigrants' Social Integration," by Jane Lilly López, Genevra Munoa, Catalina Valdez, and Nadia Terrón Ayala. Under review at *Social Sciences*.

