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### Full Circle Everest Profile

A few semesters ago, I read an article discussing the racism in the national parks service and the efforts to bring recognition to and promote black people in outdoor recreation. The report included a photo of a group of black people mountain climbing. As someone who's grown up around the ideology of "black people don't do this," I'd never seen or heard of people like me doing certain things outdoors. This experience and the course readings inspired me to investigate the Full Circle Everest Group: the 1st black climbing team to summit Mount Everest. With my limited resources in a community that struggles with representation in the outdoors and my limited knowledge of outdoor spaces, I had not heard of this group of climbers until recently. However, their accomplishments encourage others to pursue mountain climbing and explore the outdoors while they also happen to be black.

The Full Circle Everest group began making headlines in 2021 as their plans to summit Mt. Everest gained national attention. The reason for this attention is that if "all of Full Circle's members [completed] their climb, the number of Black people to have reached the top of Mount Everest [would] double immediately" (Marcus). Therefore, the individuals who composed Full Circle Everest were on track to make history in 2021. On May 12, 2022, the group announced, via Instagram, that seven of their nine team members had summited Everest, marking a

successful end to their 60-day climb. They are now the first all-black group to reach the summit of Mount Everest.

However, who would be the individuals to form such an inspiring team? Phillip Henderson is the founder of Full Circle Everest and is a significant inspiration for the group. As a pioneer in outdoor recreation, Henderson wanted to promote the black community's interest in the outdoors. As the group formed, Abby Dione, James Kagambi, Manoah Ainuu, Frederick Campbell, Eddie Taylor, Desmond Mullins, Thomas Moore, and Rosemary Saal would join the team. Each member brought significant climbing experience and knowledge: "in their individual climbing careers, they've all reached heights of more than 20,000 feet and are well-versed at climbing at high altitudes. Some have scaled Mount Kilimanjaro, Aconcagua, and Mount Denali, the tallest mountain in North America" (Pruitt-Young). During an interview with Alan Arnette, Arnette even referred to them as "the most educated team on Everest in 2022" (Arnette 6:50). The seven members to reach the top of Mount Everest were Manoah Ainuu, Eddie Taylor, Rosemary Saal, Desmond Mullins, Thomas Moore, James "KG" Kagami, and Evan Green. With the support of sherpa guides, eight of whom also summited, their film crew, and sponsorships from organizations like North Face and the VF Foundation, the group was able to scale the 8,849-meter-tall mountain and cement a legacy to galvanize the next generation of black climbers and open the doors for others.

When asked about the team's goal, Phillip Henderson said, "The objective is to climb the mountain. That is the number one objective; that has to be the number one objective" (Henderson qtd. in Arnette). During this course, I thought a lot about how minority individuals, such as women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people, must make extraordinary examples when they accomplish the same tasks that white, straight men usually perform. It is not that these minorities

are not achieving the same things, but that media and society usually only perpetuate one narrative. Thus, organizations like the Full Circle group must create their story through tremendous feats, and often the essential task they complete can be lost among the grand statement. Therefore, Henderson's opinion of the team wanting to climb the mountain first is everything.

According to the group's website, their other goal is to “represents a zenith in generational perseverance” as the climb displayed “[...]the barriers that continue to exist for Black communities in accessing the outdoors” (Full Circle Everest). Additionally, with their successful attempt at climbing Everest, they hope to “[...] inspire the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts, educators, leaders, and mountaineers of color to continue chasing their personal summits” (Full Circle Everest). The main goal of the team was to climb Mount Everest, and now they will continue to “[...] demystify this process” as Abbey Dione states in her CNN interview (Dione qtd. in Marcus). They are working to combat the assumptions society and the black community push onto its members that spread the false idea that black people do not belong in the outdoors or are not in the outdoors. They acknowledge the lack of representation of black people in the wild, the negative connotations surrounding the black community's relationship with the outdoors, and the general scarcity of opportunity black people have to experience nature. Henderson says, “There's so few of us at this level that it's our duty, [...] to bring this to our communities, to our young people and talk about the benefits of being outdoors and connecting with nature and having a healthy lifestyle throughout their lives” (Henderson qtd. in Pruitt-Young). The main thing that stands out about this group is that the emphasis they are mountain climbers who happen to be black. This statement may seem simple, but it points to the ultimate goal of their outreach: they want it to be normal. They do not want to continue the

assumption that ‘black people do not mountain climb, hike, or anything else outdoors’; instead, they hope to show future generations that they can complete extraordinary feats while being ordinary.

So how does Full Circle Everest’s journey reflect the topics raised during this 4-week-course? Our readings of Carolyn Finney’s *Black Faces, White Spaces*, and Arlene Blum’s *Annapurna: A Woman’s Place* motivated my research. Blum directed me to look especially into minority mountain climbers; however, Finney’s work emphasized the point of engaging underprivileged groups in outdoor spaces, focusing on Full Circle’s public outreach. As *Black Faces, White Spaces* explains, Full Circle Everest demonstrates the adverse effects of the lack of black faces in white spaces, the importance of representation, and the necessity to encourage black outdoor participation.

According to the American Alpine Association, Phillip Henderson notes that black people make up 1% of the climbing community in the United States (2:49). Typically, when searching for or thinking about mountain climbers, the likely depiction is of a white male. As stated, Full Circle Everest works to break down this stereotypical view. They face a long history of media coverage and societal lure directed at white men to lose themselves in the wild. Carolyn Finney states, “While African Americans participate in a wide range of outdoor activities, our media visibility appears to be limited to work and recreational images that do not consider African Americans’ diversity of experience” (Finney 80). In other words, though black people mountain climb, hike, and do other outdoor ventures, society usually ignores or overlooks those endeavors to maintain certain assumptions. It is not that black people do not do these things. Instead, the media does not depict them in these roles. There is a lack of representation of black faces in supposed white space even though they exist and thrive there. Before Full Circle

Everest's climb, Mount Everest was primarily a figuratively white space because, previously, out of over ten thousand people to the summit, only eight to ten had been black. Although this is still a low statistic even after Full Circle's success, their media attention, achievement, and engagement reimagine the black community's relationship with the sport. Often, someone only needs to see one black face or someone who looks like them, to spark an interest in exploring assumedly white spaces.

The group's mere attempt at Everest is inspirational for minority communities and young black people because they were able to meet and witness the power behind black mountain climbers before the trip even began. Finney states, "What people do not see makes it more challenging for them to imagine" (Finney 81). Therefore, the group's social media, website, and multiple interviews and public engagements continue to aid their efforts in showing others what they can do. During their interview with Alan Arnette, Henderson recalls a story from his community outreach opportunities where a young black girl and her mother approached him. He remembers she asked, "What would you say to a young 11-year-old black girl who wants to climb Mount Everest?" (11:35-12:25). Henderson uses this anecdote to highlight the importance of representation, social capital, or public engagement. According to Carolyn Finney, "Stereotypes constrain representation of African Americans by reducing black people to a few essential characteristics, thereby limiting their ability as individuals to fully realize who they are" (Finney 72). Thus, for the young girl in Henderson's story, being able to listen to his prior experiences in nature and on Mount Everest motivated her to see herself possibly doing the same when she may not have previously had that motivation. This course primarily focuses on bringing attention to those not considered part of the outdoor experience. From women to

African Americans and other diverse groups, like this course, Full Circle Everest hopes their accomplishment can help others consider who can be in outdoor spaces.

Ultimately, the Full Circle Everest team wants other people to experience what it means to be a mountain climber and help them participate in outdoor activities. Despite all the barriers black people face in finding themselves outdoors, this organization wants them to know they are welcome to explore freely. Sharon Pruitt-Young shares Abbey Dione's explanation of the group's aim in her article. She writes, "[...] Full Circle aims to "de-colonize" Everest climbs. It isn't just about increasing the visibility of mountaineers of color but about using inclusive language" (Pruitt-Young). She further shares that their goal is to " [...] help folks aspire to have a profound and respectful relationship with the outdoors and feel not entitled to it, but welcome to it. If you see it can be done, you can do it right" (Pruitt-Young). Carolyn Finney's driving message in *Black Faces, White Spaces* is the importance of representation to encourage black people to participate in the outdoors more. With the lack of diversity in these spaces and activities, many African Americans feel they cannot be in specific environments. Full Circle Everest inspire others to seek their own outdoor experiences.

Though this course primarily focuses on women in the wild, the first week of our study mainly dealt with black people in the wild, a topic that often raises painful and uncomfortable conations. However, despite the lack of diversity in recreational activities and the environment, the Full Circle Everest team is an example of the many things black people can do in the outdoors despite several factors. After the success of Full Circle Everest, the number of black people to summit Mount Everest doubled to about twenty out of thousands. Seven members of their team reached the top of one of the world's tallest mountains and presented inspiration for other African Americans that they too can traverse the outdoors.

## Works Cited

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