



## **Washington Black Tool Kit for Discussion Groups**

### **Author Biography: Esi Edugyan**

*Esi Edugyan was born to Ghanaian parents in Alberta, Canada, and raised in Canada.*

Her work first appeared in anthologies and she is the author of two novels. Her first novel, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* (2005), tells the story of a man who inherits a mansion in a small town in Canada and moves his family there, believing that this is his second chance at life. It was shortlisted for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. Her second novel, *Half-Blood Blues* (2011), is about a mixed-race jazz band in World War II Paris and Berlin and what happens after their star trumpeter, Hieronymus Falk, disappears in 1940. In 2011, *Half-Blood Blues* won the Scotiabank Giller Prize (Canada) and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize (Canada) and the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction (Canada).

Edugyan has also written a work on non-fiction *Dreaming of Elsewhere: Observations on Home*, published in 2014. Esi Edugyan has taught creative writing at John Hopkins University and the University of Victoria and lives in Victoria, British Columbia.

Adapted from <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/esi-edugyan>

## Discussion Questions (provided by the publisher)

1. Big Kit tells Washington that “If you dead, you wake up again in your homeland. You wake up free.” How does this line resonate at the end of the book, in the final moments as Wash asks about Dahomey and looks out into the horizon?
2. Why do you think Big Kit didn’t tell Wash that she was his mother? Do you think he would have responded to Titch’s offer differently had he known? How might his life have been different?
3. Another secret kept in the novel is when Philip delays giving Titch the news of his father’s death—which turns out not to be true. How does this lie compare to Big Kit’s? How is Titch’s response different from Wash’s?
4. Wash describes his scar from the explosion with the Cloud Cutter as “the utter destruction [that] his act had now wrought upon my life.” Discuss the kinds of scars the characters sustain in the novel, both visible and invisible.
5. Tanna tells Wash, “You are like an interruption in a novel, Wash. The agent that sets things off course. Like a hailstorm. Or a wedding.” How does this metaphor manifest in literal and symbolic ways throughout Wash’s journeys?
6. Wash’s final meeting with Titch calls into question Titch’s motives for educating him. Wash accuses Titch of not really treating him as more than a slave. What is Wash’s benchmark for love and trust? Do Big Kit and Tanna fill the holes in his life that send him on an “erratic pursuit of an unanswerable truth [and] calm my sense of rootlessness—solve the chaos of my origins”?
7. Describe Wash and Tanna’s relationship. What qualities and life experiences do they share that draw them together? What differences create a gulf between them?
8. How is Wash sometimes manipulated by those around him? Who would you say is the worst offender? As one example, consider the bounty Erasmus puts on his head. Do you believe Titch’s remark that it was more a way to get back at Titch than a desire to find Wash?
9. What does it mean to be a “master” in this time period and for these characters? Recall Wash’s first impression of Philip as “the oddity of a body used for nothing but satisfying urges, bloated and ethereal as sea foam, as if it might break apart. He smelled of molasses and salted cod, and of the fine sweetness of mangoes in the hot season.”

10. Part of what Titch first notices in Wash is an uncanny gift for drawing. How does the ability to observe and record run through the novel as a motif? What becomes, as Titch says, “worthy of observation”?

11. What draws Wash to the beauty of the octopus? What does it mean for him, a former slave, to capture it and other specimens for study and display, even with the motive of showing people that creatures they thought were “nightmarish . . . were in fact beautiful and nothing to fear”?

12. Titch's confession about how he treated Philip as a boy reveals a new side of him to Wash. Does this revelation lead you to feel more or less compassion toward him? Does it complicate his relationship with Wash?

13. The novel is set between 1830 and 1836 and takes place on multiple continents. How are the larger global and political tremors shaking the world during this time felt through the characters? For example, Titch is described as an Abolitionist and often derided for it. How does this aspect of his worldview affect the way he behaves? What about your perceptions of him as a character?

14. Today in 2021, there are many groups suffering under the oppression of cruel governments and leaders. How might a narrative of their experiences compare to Wash's? How are today's oppressed being given or denied a voice?

## **Whatcom County Anti-Racism Resources**

[Talking about Race, Ethnicity, and Racism - Bellingham Public Library](#)

[Racism and Antiracism: Resources for Learning – Whatcom County Library System](#)

[Data on Racial Disparities In Whatcom County Community.pdf](#)

[Anti-Racist Reading List](#)

[Whatcom Human Rights Task Force](#)

[Whatcom Peace and Justice Center](#)

[Racial Equity Commission](#)

[Bellingham Racial Justice Coalition](#)

[Bellingham Racial History Timeline – Western Washington University](#)

[Village Books - So you want to learn more about race...](#)

## **Additional Research on Topics in *Washington Black***

[Early Caribbean Digital Archive](#) (Northeastern University in Boston) – an open-access collection of pre-20th century Caribbean material, which aims to use digital tools to foreground the centrality and resourcefulness of enslaved and free African, Afro-creole, and indigenous peoples in the Caribbean; it includes early slave narratives, European accounts of travel, and runaway slave ads; also an exhibit about Visualizing Natural History and Obeah: the Magical Art of Resistance.

[Digital Library of the Caribbean](#) – digital copies of [Barbados newspapers](#) from between 1783 and 1848 (ads for slaves, etc)

[Tissandier Collection](#) (Library of Congress) contains approximately 975 items documenting the early history of aeronautics with an emphasis on balloon flight in France and other European countries. Subjects include general and technical images of balloons, airships, and flying machines; portraits of famous balloonists; views of numerous ascensions, accidents, and world's fairs; cartoons featuring balloon themes; pictorial and textual broadsides; and colorful ephemera and poster advertisements.

[Aquarium of the Pacific live webcam – good quality and really fun and relaxing to watch, but I've yet to see an octopus! There is an OctoCam at OR State University, but the quality is really bad and its hard to make out anything.](#)

## CONTEXT: Demographics

Working through this collection of data beginning with the understanding of the racial demographics in Whatcom County is essential. When discussing these disparities, this demographic spread lets us know how many of our neighbors are impacted by inequity. It also lets us know how many lives we have the potential to change, to improve in our community. Turning the curve on racial inequity means improving the lives of about 14% of the population.

- Whatcom's Population: 229,247 people
  - White: 196,748.9 (86.2%)
  - Asian: 11,004 (4.8%)
  - Hispanic: 22,466 (9.8%)
  - Indigenous: 7,794 (3.4%)
  - Black: 2,980 (1.3%)

*US Census Bureau 2019 Estimates*

## Health

The conversation of health, healthcare, and the determinants of health is significantly broader than it is represented in this data. Recognizing that, local data shows that an Indigenous baby born in Whatcom County has a 12-year shorter life expectancy than their white neighbors. We have less than 8,000 Indigenous folks in our community, and they represent 5,200 years of potential life lost.

- Total years of potential life lost prematurely (<65 years of age): Black and Indigenous Whatcom County residents, though representing 4% of the population, lost **1,200-5,200 years of potential life** more than the White community in 2016.
- Life expectancy at birth: **-12.14-year** differential between Indigenous populations and White neighbors. Migrant Farmworkers have the greatest differential.
  - White LEAB: 81.43 yrs
  - Indigenous LEAB: 69.29 yrs (only 4.29 years older than standard premature death)
  - Migrant Farmworkers LEAB: 49 years (**-32.43 year** differential)
- 38% of Whatcom County 10th Graders report experiencing depression.
  - White Sophomores: 36%
  - Multiracial Sophomores: 44%. **+8% higher** than White classmates
  - Black Sophomores: 43%. **+7% higher** than White classmates
  - Indigenous Sophomores: 66%. **+28% higher** than White classmates
- 10th Graders in Whatcom County report serious suicidal ideation at a 4% higher rate than the Washington state average.

*2018 Community Health Assessment, Healthy Whatcom*

- 1 in 9 households are food insecure in Washington state
  - Low income households of color, especially Black and Hispanic homes, are **2x more** likely to have trouble getting food on the table than White households.

*2020 King County Strategic Climate Action Plan Update*

- **82%** of Whatcom County 10th Graders do not eat the USDA's recommended 5+ servings of fruits and vegetables

*2018 Community Health Assessment, Healthy Whatcom*

## Economic Development

While the national average income for any race does not meet Healthy Whatcom's reported survival budget for a family of four, there is a 22-47% income gap between Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic community members and their White neighbors. That being said, the Hispanic community has more buying power nationally than the GDP of Australia and is the second fastest growing economic demographic. Economic development creates the opportunity to turn poverty into prosperity.

- Survival Budget for Whatcom County: \$66,480 (2 adults, 1 preschooler, 1 infant)
  - Whatcom County Median: \$55,145
  - Average income by race
    - White: \$55,198 (83% of the survival budget)
    - Asian: \$58,662 (88% of the survival budget; **+5%** compared White neighbors)
    - Hispanic: \$40,514 (61% of the survival budget; **-22%** compared to White neighbors)
    - Indigenous: \$31,655 (48% of the survival budget; **-35%** compared to White neighbors)
    - Black: \$23,690 (36% of the survival budget; **-47%** compared to White neighbors)

*2018 Community Health Assessment, Healthy Whatcom, American Community Survey, US Census Bureau*
- Immigrants employed more than 4.7 million Americans and generated more than 776 billion in revenue in 2013
- 75% of patents issued at top 10 universities were to immigrants
- Hispanic businesses make up 28% of all small businesses nationally  
*Commissioner Luis A. Aguilar US Securities Exchange Commission 2013, Fiscal Policy Institute*
- The buying power of BIPOC communities in 2018 was \$3.9 trillion
  - Black: \$1.3 trillion
  - Asian: \$1 trillion
  - Indigenous: \$115 billion
  - Hispanic: \$1.5 trillion
    - Australia's GDP: \$1.4 trillion
- Both Asian (**267%**) and Hispanic (**212%**) communities experienced the fastest growth rates of any other ethnicities since 2000.

*The Multicultural Economy Report 2018, Selic Center of Economic Growth*



## Education

Education is a pathway to future economic success. It is opportunity. Our Hispanic, Indigenous, English Language Learners, and low-income students are less ready to start school and less likely to graduate on time. If low-income students are less likely to graduate on time AND education, graduation is a pathway to economic success there is a cycle being perpetuated leading to these outcomes.

- Kindergarten Readiness:
  - 19% of English Language Learners are Kindergarten Ready. **32% less** than those who already speak English
  - 26% of Low-income children are Kindergarten ready. **33% less** than those with higher incomes
  - White child readiness: 54%
  - Hispanic child readiness: 27%. **27% less** than White neighbors
  - Indigenous child readiness: 23%. **31% less** than White neighbors
- On-time Graduation Rates
  - 68% of Limited English speakers graduate on time. **12% less** than those who speak English
  - 67% of Low-income students graduate on time. **24% less** than those with higher incomes
  - White student graduation rate: 82%
  - Hispanic student graduation rate: 71%. **11% less** than White classmates
  - Indigenous student graduation rate: 63%. **19% less** than White classmates

*2018 Community Health Assessment, Healthy Whatcom*

## Child Welfare

Currently the population of children of color in our foster cares system is disproportionately higher. Families of color experience a higher rate of calls to protective services. These children see a higher rate of intakes, are less likely to be placed back with family, and remain in the system longer. More alarming is that a consideration for child removal is if a parent was once a foster child themselves. At the beginning of 2020 Gov. Cuomo instituted race-blind removals after Nassau County began the practice. Race-blind removals reduced the percentage of Black children removed from their families by 26.5 percent.

- The proportion of Indigenous children brought into the foster care system is **almost double** that of White children.
  - Child/ Youth intake rates per 1,000 people living in WA state
    - White: 49.67
    - Multiracial: 54.45; **10% higher** representation within the system
    - Black: 78.16; **57% higher** representation within the system
    - Indigenous: 89.52; **80% higher** representation within the system

*2019 Child Welfare Racial Disparity Indices, Washington State Office of Children, Youth, & Families*



## Criminal Legal

The disproportionate representation of BIPOC in the Criminal Legal System is a national trend. Whatcom County is no different. Our Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic communities are incarcerated at a higher rate, have greater representation in the daily population, and stay longer.

- Average Daily Population Disparities:
  - Indigenous ADP is **4x higher** than the % of the Indigenous population in Whatcom County
    - 14% of ADP; 3.4% of Whatcom's population
  - Black ADP is **5.4x higher** than the % of the Black population in Whatcom County
    - 7% of ADP; 1.3% of Whatcom's population
- Admission Disparities:
  - Black men are admitted at a **4.2x higher** rate than White men
  - Indigenous women are admitted at a **5x higher** rate than White women
  - Hispanic folks are admitted at a **3.5x higher** rate than non-Hispanic folks
- Length of Stay Disparities
  - White men average a 20 day stay and White women average 13 days
  - Black men average a 23 day stay and Black women average 21 days (**+3 days; +8 days**)
  - Indigenous men average a 23 day stay and Indigenous women average 22 days (**+3 days; +9 days**)

*2017 Whatcom County Vera Report*

## Environmental Justice

Frontline communities face the challenges of adapting to climate change while also feeling the weight of current and historic racial, social, environmental, and economic inequities. The impact of not having the same capacity for adaptation as White community members exacerbates existing inequities like food instability, lack of affordable health care, health outcomes, income disparities, and so forth within communities of color.

- BIPOC Communities are **37% more** likely to experience poor air quality
  - Black, Indigenous, and Asian community members die at a higher (up to **20% higher** rate) from asthma than White community members.
  - Breathing polluted air can cause asthma and exacerbate respiratory issues.

*2020 King County Strategic Climate Action Plan Update*