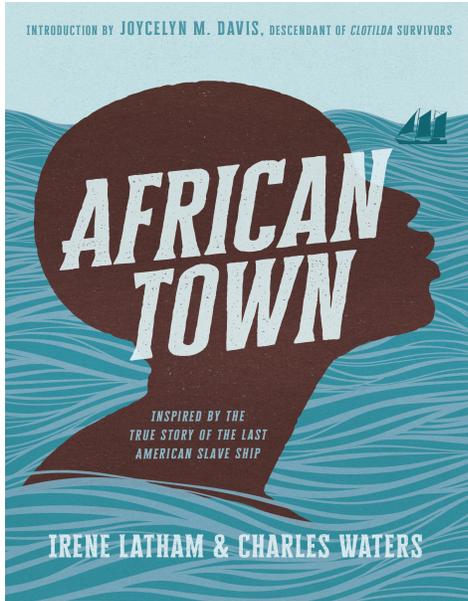


# Discussion Guide for *African Town*



by Irene Latham and Charles Waters

Introduction by Joycelyn M. Davis,  
descendant of *Clotilda* survivors

Illustrations by Vivian Shih

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## About the Book

*African Town* chronicles the real-life stories of the lives of the last Africans to be kidnapped and brought into the United States, their African and white captors, and the individual and collective trek through slavery, the Civil War, and Emancipation along the arduous road to attainment of physical, emotional, and psychological freedom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century south.

Using poetic verse, the book portrays the journey of several factual and fictional characters whose lives were forever changed by the arrogant wager of a slave holder and swashbuckler. Each character speaks using their own poetic form, which works to encapsulate their specific personalities, mannerisms, movement, emotion, intentionality, and station in life.

The singular poems give life to multiple themes that intertwine themselves into the larger themes of resilience, hope, love, grief, survival, family, and community.

## About the Authors



PHOTO CREDIT: Eric Latham

Irene Latham and Charles Waters are “Poetic Forever Friends” first and collaborators second. They are the writing team behind *Can I Touch Your Hair? Poems of Race, Mistakes, and Friendship*, which was awarded a Charlotte Huck Honor, and *Dictionary for a Better World: Poems, Quotes, and Anecdotes from A to Z*, an NCTE Notable Poetry book. They share a passion for poetry and are committed to creating meaningful books for young readers. This is their first novel together. Visit them online: [irenelatham.com](http://irenelatham.com), [charleswaterspoetry.com](http://charleswaterspoetry.com)



# **Common Core Standards**

## **Reading Literature - Key Ideas and Details:**

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1](#)**

Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

## **Craft and Structure:**

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.4](#)**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.5](#)**

Analyze how a drama's or poem's form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning.

## **Reading Informational - Key Ideas and Details:**

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.1](#)**

Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.2](#)**

Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.3](#)**

Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).

## **Craft and Structure:**

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.4](#)**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

## **Writing – Informational and Literature - Text Types and Purposes:**

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1](#)**

Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3](#)**

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

## **History/Social Studies - Key Ideas and Details:**

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1](#)**

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

### **[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2](#)**

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

## **Art and Humanities**

### **[CCSS.ART.9.1.8.B](#)**

Recognize, know, use and demonstrate a variety of appropriate arts elements and principles to produce, review and revise original works in the arts.

## **Pre-Reading**

Explore multiple forms of poetry and understand their attributes.

Have a working knowledge of the American slave trade, the Civil War, and the Emancipation Proclamation.

## **Questions for Discussion**

**Use textual evidence to support each response.**

1. The *Clotilda* isn't a person, so why do you believe it was important to give the ship a "voice" as though it is a person? (pgs. 7-16)
2. After Kossola's baba tells him "Tonight you'll stay at the initiation house." Kossola thinks *finally my future unfolds*. What does he mean by this statement? (p. 22)
3. *Clotilda* says her *bottom level has been refashioned—better keep your body bent belowdecks or you'll smash your head*. What does she mean by this statement? (p. 25)
4. In the sentence *It's me leading a potentially mutinous crew across temperamental oceans*. What does the term *mutinous* mean?
5. In the sentence *we outrace it with an alacrity that causes me shortness of breath to even recall* what does the term *alacrity* mean?
6. On page 33 William says, "It's like we're human yo-yos. There's no time to whine." What does he mean by this statement?
7. The *Clotilda* says Foster is *sensing her lack of enthusiasm*. How can a ship lack enthusiasm? How do the authors use personification in this sentence?
8. Identify a moment in time for one or more of the characters where the story would have shifted dramatically had the character NOT performed a specific action. Who was the character? What was the action? How would NOT performing that act have changed the text? Would it have been for the better? Explain. (Pause reading at the end of p. 40)
9. King Glèlè says that he will "lead an attack to honor his father, King Ghezo", but how can attacking others bring honor to the memory of someone? What does King Glèlè mean by this statement? (p. 47)
10. While in the barracoon Kossola recounts the behaviors of the people surrounding him. Through his observations he exclaims "it's true de ocean doesn't stop being de ocean, and

even locked up, we don't stop being people." What does this statement say about the captives? (p. 83)

11. When Kossola sees "men with white skin" poking and prodding he is unsure of what to think and then he remembers teachings from the oro. "Dey would tell me to pay attention, because fear is sometimes de very thing that keeps us alive." How can fear keep those in the barracoon (or anyone) alive? (p. 93)
12. What does Abilè mean when in the midst of her encounter with the white men, she makes a promise to herself saying "that this new me in this new life will shrink for no one or nothing"? (p. 95)
13. Kossola is one of the many Africans chosen from the barracoon. After which he makes a statement "at least being chosen means our story doesn't end here; we're moving on to de next chapter." What is he speaking to? (p. 96)
14. When it is time for Foster to choose the women Abilè says her "heart shakes like a coconut tree during harvest." What would cause her body to react such a manner? (p. 97)
15. What does Abilè mean when she makes the statement "dignity is easier to muster as a team?" (p. 97)
16. How can a person look "as sturdy as an oak?" What does Foster mean by this statement? (p. 98)
17. While on the *Clotilda* Gumpa charges that he no longer has family, but then he says "not all family is defined by blood." How can he contradict himself? What does he mean by this statement? (p. 104)
18. Once dozens of Africans are loaded onto the *Clotilda*, Kossola notices that he has been left on the beach and he cries out "wait, wait for me." Why would he do that instead of attempting to escape? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer. If you were in Kossola's position, what would you have done? Explain (p. 112)
19. On page 118 the *Clotilda* states that her "burden is that once my riggings are set and someone mans this wheel and spindle of mine, I fly." Why would she be burdened by her speed? Wouldn't she have a desire to sail quickly? Use evidence to support your response.
20. On page 118 the authors use personification to evoke a certain feeling from the reader. *Clotilda* says "if I'd been built with a heart, it would be broken." Can you relate to this statement? In what way? Explain.
21. What is the poetic style used to give voice to Kupollée and Kossola, and why do you think was it chosen? What style would you have chosen?

22. As the voices of the kidnapped Africans “pierce the air and very nearly the heart” of William, he quickly “tamps down he feelings” and says “I can’t think of them as humans. I won’t.” Why does Foster make this statement? Why can’t he think of the Africans as humans? (p. 132)
23. How can Kossola feel a sense of “brotherhood” with men he’s only known a short period of time”? (p. 134)
24. Why does Abilè choose not to share details about her family with Kossola? What was her promise? (p. 135)
25. What do you believe would have happened had the Africans not gotten quiet as the ship move closer to the port? (p. 144)
26. What is the meaning of Abilè’s statement “For a moment the ghost I left behind swirl around me, but I push them back. They are of no use to me here. They would only weigh me down”? (p. 157)
27. What does *Clotilda* mean when she says “a confession buried by water, waiting for someone to release me”? (p. 164)
28. Timothy exclaims “I’m safe from the government. They have zero proof,” Why is Timothy so confident that there isn’t any proof of his crime? Should he be concerned? Explain. (p. 175)
29. Timothy says “those slaves better not die on me. They’re worth at least \$700 apiece,” What can we infer about Timothy’s as a person based on his concern for the slaves? Explain. (p. 179)
30. Abilè is confused as to why Kossola is always able to smile. Why do you think Kossola is still able to smile after everything they have endured? (p. 180)
31. What is James saying in this stanza “When I go to sleep each night, I can hear their cries pierce the lilac skies with loneliness and pain that breaks the moon open”? (p. 211)
32. Why do you believe the notion of blacks being equal to whites makes Timothy so upset? Why is this “sinful” in his mind? Explain. (p. 227)
33. What is the meaning of the term *swashbuckler*? (p. 246)
34. Throughout the text we are reminded of the sea shell that Kêhounco keeps with her throughout capture and captivity. What is the importance of this shell? (p. 262)
35. At this point in the text the Africans have been freed and are relishing in their returned freedom. In the midst of freedom Kupollee makes a statement, “freedom tastes different

now—sunshine, yes, but we must be careful not to get burned.” What does he mean by this statement? (p. 276)

36. Kossola makes a declaration to Abilè after she pleads for him to return to his old self and the dreadful realization of returning to Africa may not be possible. He says “she’s what’s real. No more waiting, I promise her. From this day forward I will be here, now, with you.” What does Kossola mean by this statement? Has he stopped longing to return home to Bantè? (p. 352)
37. Why is Timothy so determined to keep the Africans from casting their ballot? What does he believe will happen if they vote? (p. 361)
38. If the Africans were so adamant regarding their return to Africa, why were they taking so much care to build their lives in America?
39. When Cudjo, Jr. speaks the authors intentionally stretches out a word (e.g., f l o a t i n g) or eliminates space in between words (e.g., getmeoutofhereplease). What does this symbolize about his personality and voice given to him by the authors? Explain using evidence from the text.
40. Augustine’s poetic form is that of an acrostic poem. Why do you believe the author’s choose this style to represent Augustine?

## **Related Activities**

### **Art/Music**

Choose a character, then identify a song that best describes the mood or theme of the character during a specific time in the book. Write two paragraphs explaining why the song was chosen and how it portrays that character’s mood or theme. Use textual evidence to support your claim.

Create a diorama of 19<sup>th</sup> century African Town. Use multiple mediums to depict the citizens, residents, stores, school, etc.

Create an election pamphlet advertising the 19<sup>th</sup> century Republican and Democratic parties. Your pamphlet should work to entice, then sway, undecided voters to that party’s position.

Identify a piece of artwork (any medium) which demonstrates the theme of this text. Explain the related themes using evidence from the text.

Create a traditional Yoruba tribal mask.

## **Writing**

Write an essay comparing and contrasting the 19<sup>th</sup> century Republican and Democratic parties. Include their current and former beliefs and positions, when and why each party shifted its beliefs and position (what was the pivotal moment or event that shifted the party), and how those shifts could have affected the enslaved Africans.

Choose a poetic form used in the text and write a poem expressing your feelings as you read through this text.

Imagine that you are Timothy Meaher or William Foster. Choose a character from the text that you most identify with and write them an apology letter. Use the text to give specific details as to what you are apologizing for and identify a specific moment, or event, in the text that you would have done differently.

## **History/Social Studies**

Choose 10 events from the text's back matter and create a timeline. You must identify why each event is pivotal during that time and how it shaped future outcomes for the Africans (or a particular character) in the text.

Create your own community. Where would it be located? What systems of government would you operate under? How would the children be educated? What type of religious practices would you devise? Would you use money to purchase goods and services from each other or would you use a bartering system? If you decided to use money what would be your currency? Explain, in detail, every aspect of your community's inner-workings.

Have students take a deeper dive into the lives of the characters post 1901 by reading the back matter of the text and researching the characters.

## **Speaking**

Debate the pros and cons of the political positions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Republican and Democratic parties.

## **Science**

On page 30 of the text William notices that *Clotilda's* compass is malfunctioning and he believes the gold hidden behind the retaining wall is causing the problem. How could this occur? Experiment with a compass, identifying other materials that could cause it to malfunction.

## **About the Creator of the Guide**

Altevese Lumbers-Rosario is a 5<sup>th</sup> generation descendant of Kossola Oluale (enslaved name Cudjo Lewis) and native of Mobile, Alabama.

During her childhood and a portion of her adolescence in the Toulminville section of Mobile, Altevese would often sit at her grandmother Mary West Lumbers' feet and listen to tales of Cudjo's life in Africa and of how he and his fellow enslaved brethren developed their new community as close as possible to the beloved one that was taken from them generations ago.

She regularly visited her great grandmother, Angeline West (Kossola's granddaughter) who up until a seasoned aged continued to live in the very home that Kossola built for his family in Plateau.

When asked to write the discussion guide for this book, Altevese was honored and humbled to take part in connecting young readers to such a phenomenally moving text.

Currently Altevese resides in Philadelphia, PA where she is a teacher leader in elementary education. If you need a discussion guide such as this one, please contact her at [altevese1@gmail.com](mailto:altevese1@gmail.com).



PHOTO CREDIT: Talia Bornstein. Altevese Rosario in Africatown (formerly known as African Town) with the bust of her ancestor Kossola "Cudjo" Lewis.