

Sounding the African Atlantic

By Kathryn M. de Luna

To center Africans' intellectual contribution to the Americas, we need to tether the Atlantic's archives and methods to those used to recover earlier histories of oral societies' terms of debate in Africa. African words have long been a key resource for locating Africans' origins and, thus, decoding their practices, but comparative historical linguistic methods allow us to move beyond origins to explore enslaved Africans' fraught, contested efforts to build shared understanding within and across the language boundaries of Atlantic contexts. In *Africans' Atlantic*, such exchanges almost always occurred between speakers sharing—if one goes back far enough—a common linguistic and, therefore, intellectual heritage. Histories of ancient words and earlier multilinguistic interaction shaped what enslaved men and women from distant parts of Africa could understand of each other in the Americas, both in terms of speech and in terms of the conceptual worlds underlying words spoken. Analysis of a few African words recorded in Saint Domingue in the second half of the eighteenth century reveals the significance of Africa's deep pasts and Africanists' methods to our understanding of the ideologies undergirding enslaved men and women's political collaboration in more recent Atlantic contexts.