

Grad student explores folktales' French-Louisiana connection

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Nathan Rabalais' study offers a new perspective on Louisiana's oral tradition that takes into account France's contribution to the folklore and collective imagination of the region. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Tulane University graduate student Nathan Rabalais will spend the next academic year at the Université de Poitiers in France to continue his study of Louisiana folktales. Rabalais was one of six people awarded the Chateaubriand Fellowship in the social sciences and humanities for the academic year offered by the Embassy of France in the U.S. and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"I'm interested specifically in sound recordings of French folktales, some of which are of genres brought over to Louisiana long ago," says Rabalais, who was born in

Eunice, La. “My dissertation is a comparative study of several genres of French and Creole Louisiana folktales and their source counterparts from France, Acadia and Africa.”

Last summer, the Tulane [Department of French and Italian](#) sent Rabalais, a PhD candidate and [instructor](#), to Poitiers for two weeks to begin his preliminary research. This summer, before going to France, Rabalais is conducting archival research on Acadian folklore at the Centre d'Etudes Acadiennes Anselme-Chiasson in Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada, with a merit fellowship from the Tulane School of Liberal Arts.

Although Louisiana has not been “French” in the political sense since 1803, numerous varieties of French and Creole are still spoken in parts of the state's Acadiana region and among Native American communities, Rabalais says.

“Unfortunately, the complex history and culture of Louisiana is often vulgarized in favor of a simplistic understanding of Louisiana and its ties, both past and present, to France and the Francophone world,” Rabalais says.

In his study, Rabalais identifies several genres of French and Creole folktales in Louisiana, to demonstrate how motifs and characters have been adapted to the sociocultural context of Louisiana.

“Audio recordings of folktales also can be excellent tools for those who want to learn or familiarize themselves with Louisiana French and Creole, since these are historically oral languages.”

“Louisiana's oral tradition is the result of many diverse influences.”