

# LET THE STUDENTS MAP CANADIAN STUDIES

## Exploring Stereotypes of Canada

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the perceptions and stereotypes of Canada held by students in Nordic, Scandinavian, and Baltic countries participating in Canadian studies courses. Drawing upon eighty-seven papers submitted between 2021 and 2023, the study employs lexicometric analysis to discern recurring “othering” strategies employed by students. The interdisciplinary nature of the Canadian studies course, blending literature, history, and political science, aims to equip students with the knowledge necessary to examine the nuances of the Canadian social model. By examining cultural stereotypes, the study redefines Canadian studies as an integral component of (North) American studies, highlighting the importance of challenging initial representations and fostering critical thinking. Findings reveal students’ engagement in the process of othering, reflecting on Canadian identity, multiculturalism, and the integration of First Nations. The study underscores the significance of pedagogical interventions in creating spaces for transformation and critical reflection. Ultimately, it demonstrates the potential of area studies to assist students in structuring academic texts and encourages further exploration of themes related to memorial policies and reconciliation in courses on Canadian studies.

**Keywords:** Canadian studies, stereotypes, othering, intercultural education, critical thinking

Since the summer of 2021, Stockholm University has offered an introductory course in Canadian studies, supported by Nordplus funding, fostering collaboration among Canadian studies specialists from Scandinavian, Nordic, and Baltic countries.<sup>1</sup> This interdisciplinary online bachelor-level course, which blends literature, history, and political science, consists of lectures and discussion seminars centered around course literature. The overarching objective is to empower students with the knowledge necessary to undertake a final paper examining the nuances of Canadian identity and its social model. Students reflected on a quote by Justin Trudeau, celebrating the characteristics of the “Canadian model,” as the foundation for their final papers.

The article seeks to explore how students from the same course, residing in Nordic, Scandinavian, and Baltic countries, respectively, perceive the “Canadian model” and the recurring word associations that shape their perceptions. By examining cultural stereotypes, this contribution aims to redefine Canadian studies as an integral component of (North) American studies. Stereotypes, as general representations of Canada, offer insight into students’ expectations.<sup>2</sup> These stereotypes are recognizable because students have previously encountered images, symbols, and narratives about Canada.<sup>3</sup> Pedagogically, the course aimed to use these stereotypes as starting points to guide students toward a more nuanced understanding of Canada, with the help of critical readings such as Sunera Thobani’s work on Canadian identity.<sup>4</sup> By encouraging students to articulate their initial stereotypes, the course allowed them to reflect on their perceptions of Canada before engaging in deeper critical analysis. In this case, even “positive stereotypes” have some costs in interpersonal and social relations as they are always activated in a comparative perspective.<sup>5</sup> The aim of the article is to view pedagogical intervention as a way of creating a space of transformation where students engage in stereotyping before

reflecting on the production of these first images of Canada. Pedagogy empowers critical thinking when students reflect on their own cultural framework; as Ruth England points out,

we all view the world through our own “cultural spectacles,” tinted by our background, education, experience, beliefs and—possibly—privilege. True objectivity may not be achievable—we may not be able to view the world through others’ spectacles—but we can be aware that our own world view is just one amongst many. This may enable us to avoid imposing our cultural biases on our students and to encourage them to be aware of their own.<sup>6</sup>

This echoes the positioning of the book by Bédard-Goulet and Premat on Canadian studies from Nordic and Baltic perspectives, where the idea is to focus on a “relational ontology of becoming,” and where space is reconfigured as a projection of discourses.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the introductory course gave an opportunity to students to address their first perceptions of Canada before deepening their reflection on Canada. How do they perceive Canada? How do they relate the image of Canada to their own situation?

Drawing upon eighty-seven papers submitted by summer-school students from 2021 to 2023, this quantitative study employs lexicometric analysis to discern the ‘othering’ strategies employed.<sup>8</sup> ‘Othering’ strategies encompass the recurring use of pronouns, verbs, substantives, and adjectives, shedding light on Swedish stereotypes of Canada. This study endeavors to elucidate how these ‘othering’ strategies encapsulate the content of refined Nordic and Baltic stereotypes regarding Canada.

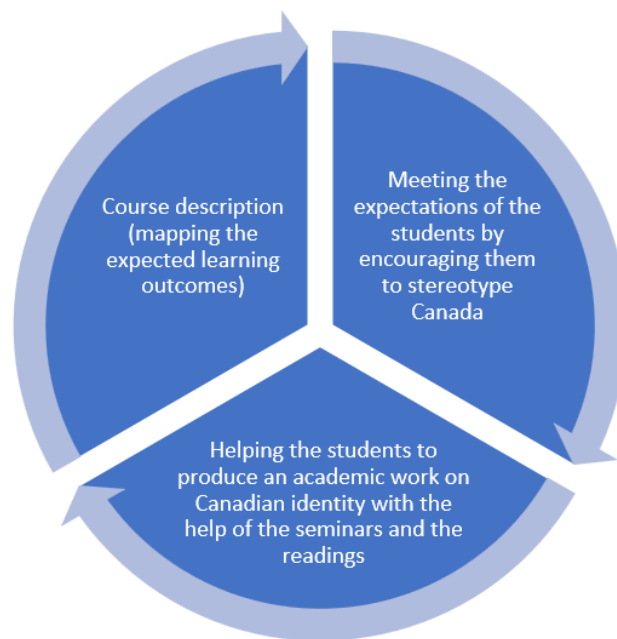
## Background

The summer course on Canadian Studies is the only course in the Nordic and Scandinavian countries that grants credits to students upon successful completion. In Norway, an introductory course was given between Spring 2007 and Spring 2017.<sup>9</sup> The course offered at Stockholm University was initially a 3-credit summer course with four three-hour seminars in 2021, but it was expanded to a 7.5-credit course in 2022 with six three-hour seminars. Despite these changes, the course objectives and descriptions remained consistent, emphasizing the history, culture, and literature of Canadian society, with particular focus on immigration, multiculturalism, First Nations, gender equality, and Quebec.<sup>10</sup> The course is a bachelor-level course aimed at enhancing critical thinking about Canadian identity. Students developed expertise on Canadian culture while also acquiring transferable critical thinking skills applicable to other academic and social contexts.<sup>11</sup>

## Methodology

The course was designed with “constructive alignment” in mind, ensuring that the course objectives and assessments aligned with the desired learning outcomes. The authors of this article, who were also the course instructors, analyzed student papers on the notion of the “Canadian model” using Tropes, a lexicometry software that evaluates pronouns, verbs, nouns, adverbs, and themes within texts. Figure 1 shows the three sequences that structured our approach.

Mapping the course description is important as it offers a series of general statements about Canadian identity that need to be analyzed in a systematic way. The course description was the same for the three different years even though the course was modified in 2022. This change



**Figure 1. Main objectives of the course on Canadian studies.**

did not affect the course description that was given to students beyond the new organization of seminars. Each summer course was based upon open lectures from different experts on Canada and seminars where some specific texts of the course literature were discussed.

The second phase was the comparison of the papers produced by students in 2021, 2022, and 2023. Table 1 describes the background of the students who took this introductory course. Table 2 provides a detailed overview of student productions.<sup>12</sup> Following the curriculum update in 2022, it's notable that the required paper length was shorter in 2021, coinciding with a smaller cohort size compared to the years of 2022 and 2023.

Year	National students	International students	Total
2021	10	5 (33.3%)	15
2022	27	3 (11.1%)	30
2023	38	4 (10.5%)	42
2021–2023	75	12 (16%)	87

**Table 1. Profile of the students from the different editions of the summer course who wrote a paper on the Canadian model. Source: data retrieved from the learning platform (Stockholm University).**

Year	Total number of words for the papers on Canada
2021	22,825
2022	65,772
2023	67,095
Total 2021–2023	155,692

**Table 2. Number of words for the papers produced by students of the summer introductory course on Canadian studies (2021–2023). Source: data retrieved from the learning platform (Stockholm University).**

We used the software Tropes to analyze both the detailed course description (not to be confused with the legal document presenting the course objectives and exams) and the students' productions. These productions were anonymized and compiled into a single document to facilitate the analyses. Tropes is a lexicometry software specialized in analyzing collocations and frequency of associations. It evaluates pronouns, verbs, nouns, adverbs, and themes within texts. This software is in a bilingual French/English version and is therefore suitable for a course on Canadian studies.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the summer course is exclusively taught in English with English materials and papers to be written in English. Regarding the instructional part for the papers, the

question was based on a quote by Justin Trudeau:

“[w]e have created a society where individual rights and freedoms, compassion and diversity are core to our citizenship. But underlying that idea of Canada is the promise that we all have a chance to build a better life for ourselves and our children.”<sup>14</sup> With the help of the course literature (art, literature . . .), reflect on that quote. Take specific examples from the different lectures to analyze the Canadian cultural model (1.500 words).

The interest of a lexicometric analysis is that it highlights common words and categories and

allows mapping the landscape of mental representations of Canada expressed by students primarily residing in Nordic and Baltic societies, as shown in Table 1. While the proportion of international students has increased (including some Canadian and American students), they are predominantly students residing in Northern Europe, including the Baltic countries.

### Findings and Discussion

The initial analysis of the themes in the course description reveals intercultural relations, as shown in Table 3. The aim is to discuss Canada as a North American country from a European perspective, hence the occurrences identified (education, North America, communication, language, Europe, society, time, control, science, and politics). Students are asked to use concepts from the humanities and social sciences; this is why the topics “education” and “control” appear.

At this stage, the course description conveys the notions of “multiculturalism” and bilingual identity while also addressing the issues of First Nations and immigration. In a way, students expect the seminars to deal with these themes. Regarding the students’ papers, Table 4 shows the frequencies of occurrence of the nouns used. Besides the terms “Canada” and “Canadian,” which are used extensively, the triad “people, society, culture” is widely discussed. Next comes “right, identity, and nation,” where students’ inquiries have primarily focused on the identity of Canada based on the populations considered. Lastly, aspects related to Canada’s openness have been mentioned, suggested by “country, diversity, immigrant, model.”

When it comes to adjectives, one can see that cultural representations are dominant, with

comparison in the background, as highlighted by Table 5: 681 occurrences for “cultural,” 478 for “Indigenous,” 275 for “different,” and 261 mentions of the term “other.”

Table 6 confirms the process of othering: students have a natural tendency to use the pronoun “they” to describe and comment on aspects related to Canadian history and society. The second pronoun used is “we” (14.4 percent), which actually demonstrates the intercultural work that students engage in by describing the Canadian social model through an inquiry linked to the original model (the Nordic, Scandinavian, and Baltic countries).

Figure 2 explores the frequent associations with the pronoun “they,” showing the attempt to define a social identity (“Canada,” “people,” “country,” “group,” “migrant,” “Canadian”). In figure 2, the references linked in blue represent antecedent associations whereas the references linked in pink refer to consecutive collocations.

Some student quotes illustrate this process of othering where there is an active questioning of the Canadian model. The following one appeared at the beginning of a paper submitted in 2021: “[i]f Canada is a mosaic made up of different unique subgroups that come together to make a whole, then what will explain the spaces in which one or more cultures fuse and come out different than they once were? These transnational ties have remained due to state policies which allow for the conservation of such cultures.”<sup>15</sup> It echoes the goal of the course, which was to capture the nation as a system of narratives as it is presented in the course literature: “Canada is considered as a cultural area that is built by discourses as well as by the direct experiences that can be made of this place.”<sup>16</sup>

Favorite topic	Occurrences
Education	106
North America	66
Communication	38
Language	33
Europe	28
Society	23
Time	23
Control	18
Science	17
Politics	14

**Table 3. Reference fields in the course description. Source: results from the Tropes software.**

Noun	Occurrences
Canada	2226
Canadian	1195
People	733
Society	686
Culture	578
Right	484
Identity	459
Nation	445
Country	431
Diversity	411
Immigrant	369
Model	365

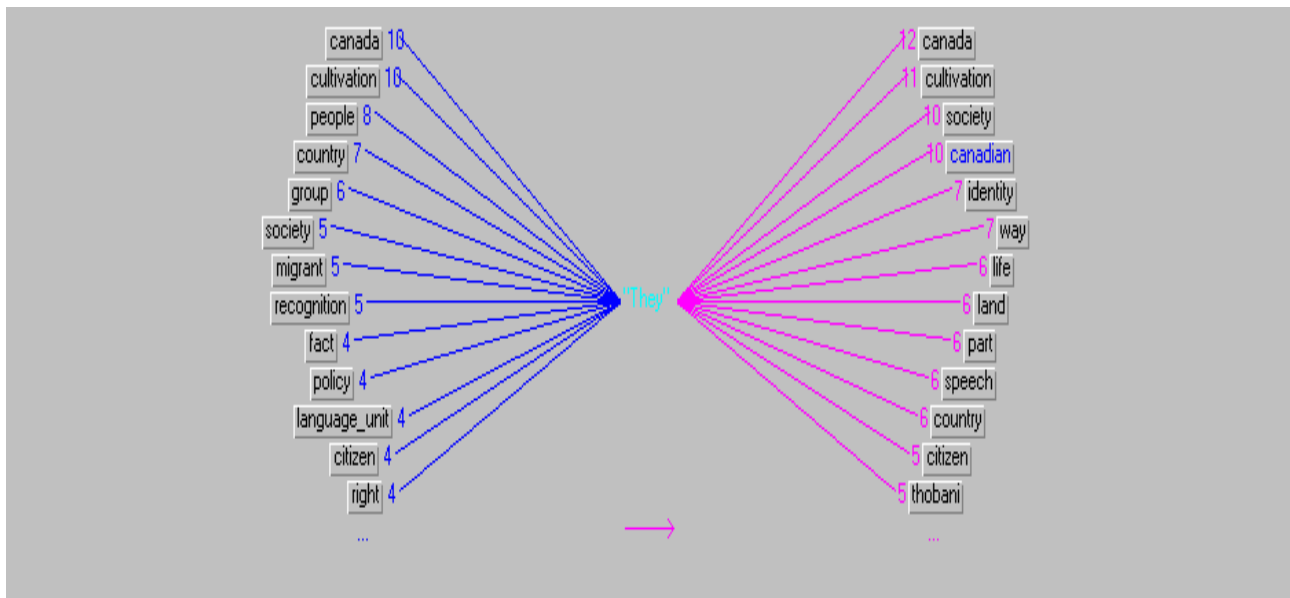
**Table 4. Frequent substantives in the student papers (2021–2023). Source: results from the Tropes software.**

Adjective	Occurrences
Canadian	786
Cultural	681
Indigenous	478
Different	275
Other	261
All	244
Individual	244
Many	242
Better	186
Politic	149

**Table 5. Frequent adjectives in the papers (2021–2023). Source: results from the Tropes software.**

Pronouns	Frequency of occurrences
I	339 (11.1%)
He/She	265 (8.6%)
We	443 (14.4%)
You	78 (2.5%)
They	674 (22%)
Somebody	115 (3.7%)

**Table 6. Frequent pronouns in the papers (2021–2023). Source: results from the Tropes software.**



**Figure 2. Frequent associations with the pronoun “they.” Source: results from the Tropes software.**

The pronoun “they” is used to question migration policies in the student papers as it is shown in figure 2. Other student quotes even had normative assumptions regarding the contrast between the discourse on Canadian multiculturalism and the challenge of integrating the First Nations: “[i]t is possible to see how Canada is contradicting itself and failing at being a truly fair multicultural society, regardless of how proud of that claim they are.”<sup>17</sup> Another quote illustrates the active othering process when it comes to First Nations: “[t]hey are called First Nations since they were the first to populate Canada, and maybe this is also why they don’t portray their own history as a separate enclave in the mosaic.”<sup>18</sup> Many students have projected an ideal type, enabling them to judge Canadian society based on several factors: integration, acceptance of minorities, and social mobility. This intercultural work was echoed in the course evaluation, where one student commented on the lectures in the following way in 2021: “[b]efore starting the course, I

wondered how one would define Canadian culture and manage it in only 4x3 hours, but you did. It was not only interesting and fun, it was also useful knowledge I’d say, especially discussing the ‘multicultural mosaic’ that is Canada in contrast to the blending process in USA.”<sup>19</sup> Other comments verified the importance of “situated knowledges”<sup>20</sup> with the active process of relating Canada to the experience of the student: “the best thing was learning about the cultural habits of [sic] and the way a society is built that it [sic] not that different from our societies but still a bit different”;<sup>21</sup> “being able to participate in lectures with students and lecturers from Northern countries”;<sup>22</sup> and “insights and the possibility to use my experiences of Canada.”<sup>23</sup>

By using course literature, particularly Sunera Thobani’s work (the name appears in figure 2, showing the centrality of the reference), students have often challenged the stereotype (in their view) of an open society. Some radical



quotes from Thobani were even commented on, such as the following one on Canadian identity: “[t]he suppression of Native Peoples, and of their social-political orders remains [*sic*] the necessary conditions of Canadian sovereignty.”<sup>24</sup> In Thobani’s view, Canada was created on the erasure of the First Nations and cultural appropriation by the two founding nations, Britain and France. The intercultural relationship shaped by the process of othering (representations of Native Peoples) became possible through this critical literature, enabling students to move beyond the official political discourse of an open and multicultural society. Critical references allowed them to engage in a dynamic evaluation of Canadian identity. However, while moving beyond the initial stereotype, they uncovered a more complex stereotype: a nation striving to reconcile the conflicting memories and perspectives of its diverse social groups. This contrast was dealt with in the course literature:

the notion of idea of a place thus appears particularly relevant within the scope of cultural studies and formulated from a geographically distant perspective such as the Nordic and Baltic countries one on Canada. Being aware of this discursive construction allows to examine how it is elaborated, sometimes to the point of forming a stereotypical image, especially when there is no direct experience of the place. Conversely, the discursive construction of a distant place generates a reflective posture on the comparable construction of the local and deconstructs the commonplace of the granted.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, beyond understanding certain aspects of Canadian culture, students were able to start reflecting on more generic concepts such as coloniality (the adjective “colonial” was used

one hundred times by students, “settler” seventy-three times, and “settlement” twenty-seven times).

This analysis of exams produced by students underscores the significance of challenging their initial representations of Canada from their own perspective. This intercultural approach fosters critical thinking and enables students to refine their initial stereotypes, thereby energizing their learning through the creation of new categories. Othering strategies employed in the papers highlight the relevance of comparison in area studies, as well as the importance of encouraging students to reflect on their own situation. Furthermore, a close examination of the results of lexicometric analysis reveals that an interest in another country activates general skills associated with critical thinking.<sup>26</sup> This underscores the potential of area studies in assisting students in structuring academic texts by applying them to different contexts. Notably, students’ willingness to understand Canada’s history through the lens of First Nations’ issues opens avenues for exploring themes related to memorial policies and reconciliation. These insights are reinforced by course evaluations, affirming the validity of the findings of this analysis.

## Notes

1. Bédard-Goulet and Premat, *Nordic and Baltic Perspectives*; Project "Enhancing Canadian Studies in the Nordic Countries", grant number NPHE-2020/10138, 2020–2022.
2. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*; Oustinoff, "The Avatars," 48–53.
3. Bodenhausen and Macrae, "Stereotype Activation and Inhibition," 1–52; Beeghly, "What is a Stereotype?" 675–91.
4. Thobani, *Exalted Subjects*.
5. Czopp et al., "Positive Stereotypes," 458.
6. England, "Countering Stereotypes," 64–66.
7. Bédard-Goulet and Premat, *Nordic and Baltic Perspectives*, 8.
8. Dervin, "Discourses of Othering," 43–55.
9. University of Oslo, "NORAM1504."
10. Stockholm University, "Introduction to Canadian Studies." The course description is a document sent to enrolled students.
11. Spencer et al., "Curriculum Mapping," 217–31.
12. Premat, "Dataset on the Expression."
13. <http://www.tropes.fr/>. Accessed April 29, 2024.
14. Trudeau, "Canadian Middle Class."
15. Quote 1 from a paper submitted in 2021.
16. Bédard-Goulet and Premat, *Nordic and Baltic Perspectives*, 7.
17. Quote 2 from a paper submitted in 2021.
18. Quote 3 from a paper submitted in 2022.
19. Comment 1 from the course evaluation of 2021.
20. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 577–99.
21. Comment 2 from the course evaluation of 2021.
22. Comment 3 from the course evaluation of 2021.
23. Comment 4 from the course evaluation of 2021.
24. Thobani, *Exalted Subjects*, 39.
25. Bédard-Goulet and Premat, *Nordic and Baltic Perspectives*, 7.
26. Davies, "Critical Thinking," 529–44.

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