

Cross-Cultural Living

Living in a foreign culture is an experience we often look forward to with excitement and enthusiasm. However, many of us are unprepared for the extent of cultural dissimilarity we encounter, and may experience pronounced reactions to the psychological disorientation of getting used to a new way of doing things. This very real phenomenon is called "culture shock" by some, and all travellers entering a foreign culture are affected by it in some way. Others prefer to call the experience "cultural adaptation". Although culture shock may feel intense and strike suddenly, adapting to the new culture is imperative for a happy journey.

What is culture? According to Robert Kohls, author of the *Survival Kit to Overseas Living*, culture is everything that a group of people thinks, does and makes. It is learned and transmitted from generation to generation.

On the Road to Cultural Adaptation: Three Stages

In adapting to a new culture, expect to go through three distinct stages. The progress through these stages varies for each individual, and is often a function of the length of time spent away from home.

Stage One "The Honeymoon Phase": The first few days or weeks in a new culture are exciting, new and exotic, a sensory delight. Tourists who go overseas for two weeks may not leave the honeymoon phase. People about to spend years overseas may have very long honeymoon periods. But, soon enough, this blissful feeling wears off.

Stage Two "Culture Shock": Cultural shock is the emotional and/or physical upset we experience settling into a new culture. For some, culture shock is brief and hardly noticeable. For others, it can cause intense discomfort often accompanied by hyper-irritability, bitterness, resentment, homesickness and depression. Some may experience physical symptoms such as upset stomach, fatigue, insomnia and headaches.

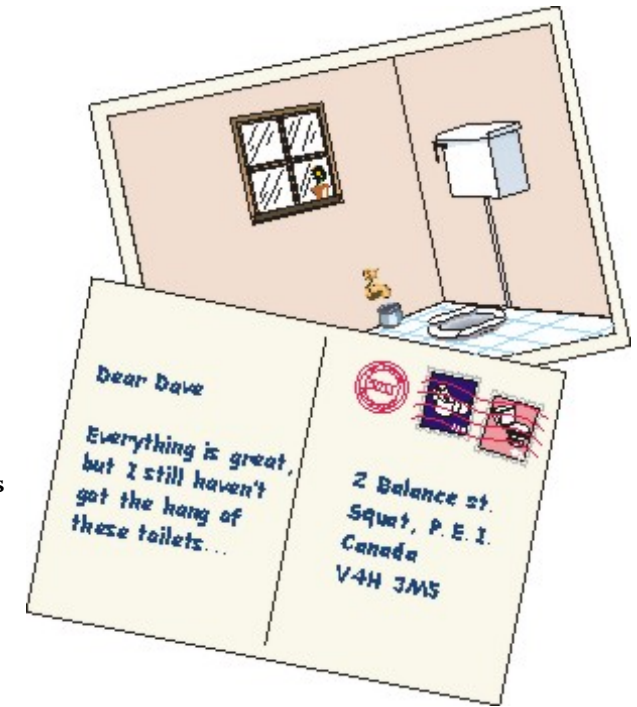
Reflect on a time when you have previously experienced a form of culture shock. Are you having difficulty remembering one? What about the first time you changed schools, your first year at university. Have you ever moved to another city?

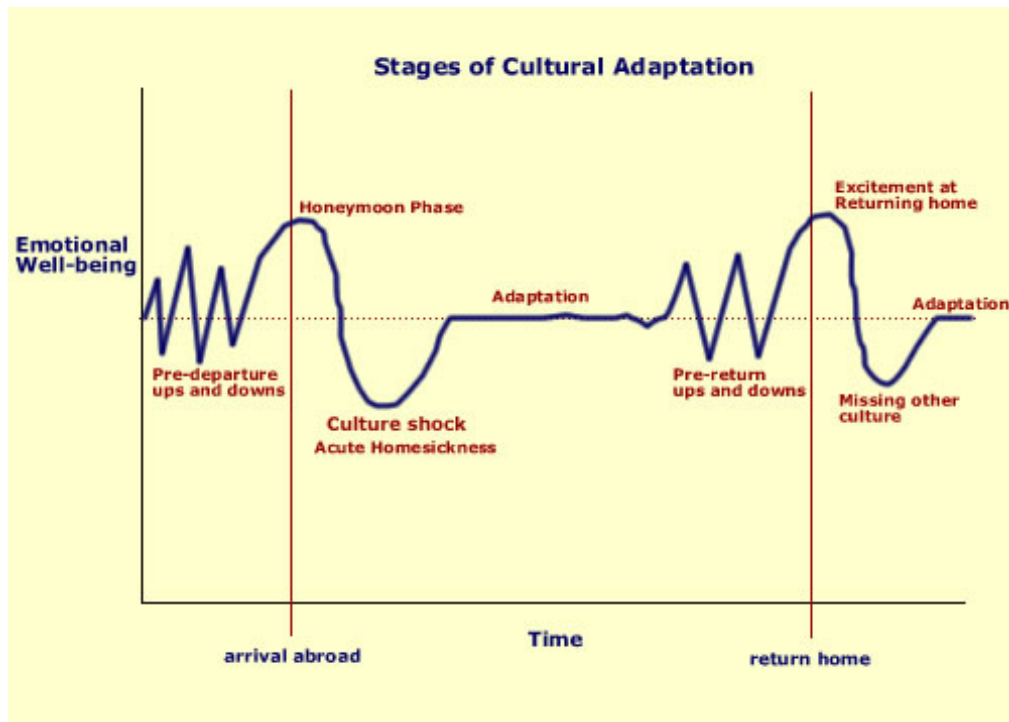
Cultural shock is normal. Recognizing it is the most important step in preparing yourself for it. See below for more ideas on how to deal with culture shock. See also, "Managing stress" in the "Wellness" section .

Stage Three "Cultural Adaptation": Cultural adaptation involves psychological adjustment and social adjustment and refers to the success of adapting to a new culture by participating in the local culture, learning the language, making friends, and enjoying life. Accept the lesson that cultural adaptation teaches. One's culture, even the Canadian culture, does not pose the only way, right way, or best way of doing something. Reaching this state of cultural nirvana takes time. Do not rush it. Just be aware of the three stages. Observe and facilitate your progress throughout them. Keeping a journal is an excellent way to observe this.

What to Expect

The graph below will give you some idea of the emotional ups and downs that most people go through when they move to another culture.





Prior to your departure you'll be busy with all the details of pre-trip preparation. It can be a stressful and exciting time. One minute you're excited about your trip and the next you're worried you may not get your visa in time. Often, people are so busy that they don't emotionally process their departure until they are on the plane. For many this is the first time they realize they are *really* going.

For most people **arrival in the host culture** brings elation and excitement. Yes, that's really the Eiffel Tower or the Sydney Opera House or the Pyramids. It can feel like you're walking through a real-life postcard. Just remember, the fact that you are new to the culture and a little in awe can make you stand out as a tourist and a target for con artists and thieves so be aware as you walk around taking in all the wonders.

For some, the pre-trip preparation combined with jetlag and general travel weariness can cause a different reaction. A few students arrive in the host culture and feel that they immediately want to return home. This sudden onset culture shock is usually the result of several factors:

- being so busy prior to departure that you never got a chance to mentally process your trip and prepare yourself emotionally.
- assuming that because you've been to a culture before or that, because it's essentially similar to your home culture, you won't experience culture shock. When you arrive, and do experience culture shock it is usually more severe because you weren't

expecting it.

- Jetlag, and tiredness make everything seem worse. Any little thing that goes wrong when you arrive can seem like a big deal. When you're tired and not feeling well the first place you want to be is home.
- You may have chosen a host culture that is more challenging than you thought it would be but give it a chance, don't make any decision about staying or going until you've had a chance to catch up on your sleep and settle in a bit. For tips on dealing with culture shock go to the section [While You're Away](#).

Usually, the excitement of the honeymoon phase is followed by a down time. This is when many experience **culture shock** or **acute homesickness**. For longer trips it is not unusual for this low point to happen about 6 weeks after arrival in the host culture. You may find it's a time when the new and exciting elements of your host culture no longer seem to compensate for the things you miss about home. You may notice that you want to spend more time with other Canadians or other expatriates. This can turn into a time of local culture bashing so be careful not to spend too much time with others who are homesick or you may find you're spending all your time away with other expats complaining about your host cultures. Try and avoid too much negativity. Get out and discover the things you enjoy about the culture.

Once you establish your daily routine you'll find your own comfort level in your new home. You may have deciphered the local transportation system, made some new friends or be energized by your studies or work activities; all these little triumphs will help you begin to feel at home. Life will settle into a regular pattern with the little ups and downs one expects in any life. You've **adapted** and settled in.

As you get closer to returning home you'll experience the same **pre-travel ups and downs** as you did before you left home. Upon your return it will feel like a **second honeymoon**. You'll be excited to see all your friends and family. However, as they attend to their daily lives and you realize that many people don't want to see your photos or their eyes glaze over when you talk about your trip, things can get a little depressing. You'll feel homesick for the life and friends you left behind in your host culture. Remember that this is normal. It takes time to adjust to being home just as it did to being away. Once you re-establish a daily routine and get back into your old activities -and some new ones probably- things will begin to even out.

For tips on dealing with any of these stages of cultural adaptation go to the section [While You're Away](#).

The Cross-cultural Workplace

If your sojourn abroad will involve a work placement you may have some extra cultural challenges. Aside from the extra work of finding a job and ensuring you have the proper immigration documents to work legally, you will also need to know about attitudes towards, punctuality, authority, and balancing work and social activities. Below are a few questions you should consider about working in your host country.

Work Place Etiquette

- How should you introduce yourself? By first name? Formally with your title?
- How should you address others? In many countries first names are not used until you are invited to do so.
- Does religion play a role in daily life at the workplace?
- Is there a specific mode of dress appropriate for the workplace?
- Are there certain clothing items not permitted in the workplace?
- How are appointments made?
- Is there a particular reverence shown for symbols of office such as business cards?

Work style

- What level of commitment to your work is expected? Do most people work extra hours? Is it expected that you take work home?
- Is negotiation appropriate? With whom?
- Does entertaining enter into the work world? In what capacity?
- Is an aggressive "go-getter" style valued or frowned upon?
- Are you expected to keep your work and your social life separate or is it more common to mix social activities with business?

Time

- How important is punctuality?
- How are lunch and breaks handled?
- What are the regular business hours for your company or organization?
- What is the average number of hours worked in a week?
- What days of the week are offices generally open?

Holidays

- What are the statutory holidays of the country?
- Are there certain times of the year that affect how businesses are run for example, longer hours at busy times?
- Are there standard times of the year when you are expected to take holidays for example, a summer shutdown or extended Christmas or other religious holiday?
- How much advance notice is expected when scheduling holidays? Can you take "this Friday" off or do you need to schedule things weeks in advance?

Workplace Legislation

- What laws govern workplace safety, sexual harassment or other situations?
- What are your rights as a worker?
- Are strikes common in your host country?
- What might be expected of you in a strike?

Salaries and payment

- How will you be paid?
- Will you need to open a local bank account in order to be paid?
- What will be deducted from your pay? Taxes? Benefits?
- What benefits are you entitled to?
- Will you be paid a similar wage to coworkers in the same job?

Role of women

- How are women viewed in the workplace?
- Are women expected to have a different work style than men?

Respect for authority

- What is the expected relationship between you and your supervisor?
- Is it acceptable to criticize those above you?
- What are the limits of your supervisor's authority? In some countries your boss can determine where you live.
- What action is acceptable (and most useful) if you have a conflict with your superior or a co-worker?

Language

- Is a more formal level of language expected at work?
- Are gender inclusive terms commonly used or is it more acceptable to use more traditional terms such as "chairman"?

For more information on cultural norms in the workplace check out: **Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands** - <http://www.getcustoms.com/>

Cultural Stereotypes

A cultural stereotype is a pre-determined belief about another culture. Within every person lies stereotypes about other people. The stereotypes you carry reflect those of your culture. This applies equally to you and to the people you will meet. Some stereotypes turn out to be accurate while others have their roots in racism.

If you are travelling on an academic exchange from a Canadian institution, you will first be perceived as a Canadian even if you are a citizen of another country. You will be considered as knowledgeable about Canada because you study and live in Canada.

The people you meet overseas will have stereotypes about you, learned from other Canadians or Westerners they have met, or possibly from Hollywood movies. Some common stereotypes about Canadians:

- Canadians live in igloos.
- All Canadians are wonderful and polite.
- Canadians are Americans.

Keep in mind that you are an ambassador for your country and your institution. Your actions may be seen as representative of all Canadians. Look at your experience abroad as an opportunity for two (three if you are a citizen of another country) cultures to learn about each other!

- Reflect on the cultural norms and values of your host country. What do you think your host country expects of you?

Similarly, you will bring stereotypes about the people you visit. This is part of your cultural baggage. Try to see every new culture, new place and new person with a new set of eyes. You'll be surprised by the diversity you see, even within a seemingly homogeneous culture and many of the stereotypes you carry will

disappear.

Coping Strategies - Understanding & Humour!

Do extensive research before you go, and do not stop learning once you get there. Know your host country and culture.

- Learn the language! Begin right away, immerse yourself, listen to others, speak with them. Start simply. Read comic books, children's books and carry a phrase-book. Learn how to say "hello", "please", "thank you" and "excuse me", in the host language - formally and informally. Know when to use each.
 - Ask what the reasons are behind everything in the host culture that seems strange, difficult, or confusing or threatening. Keep things in perspective.
 - Make a list of all the positive things (like learning a new word or trying new food) that you can identify about your present situation. Focus on these over any negatives.
 - Foreigners in a foreign land often flock together to discuss their situations. While it can be helpful to have someone to speak with who understands your perspective, avoid the temptation to spend all of your time with other expatriates. Frequently, these turn into gripe sessions and slow down the process of cultural adaptation.
 - Keep your sense of humour! Be able to laugh with yourself and others over the mistakes you make.
 - Keep yourself active. Don't sit around feeling sorry for yourself. Take a trip, visit a nearby tourist attraction or even another country. When you return, you'll probably have some good "coming back home" feelings.
 - Keep in touch with friends and family at home. Do not dwell on the negatives in your phone calls and letters but rather focus on your accomplishments and new experiences.
 - If you keep a journal, re-read journal entries from your early days abroad. See how much you have learned and how far you have come.
- Experiencing cultural adaptation is a personal learning experience unlike any other. It is an opportunity for personal reflection and growth. Indulge in it!

Tips on Fitting in: Cross-cultural Communication

- Be unfailingly polite. If you do not know what it means to be polite in your host culture, use the most conservative standards of Canadian etiquette and ask where you are unsure.
- Know the place of humour in your host culture. You may be laughed at for inexplicable reasons. Similarly, your brand of humour may not be appreciated. Some comments may be taken literally, so watch yourself when just joking around.
- Speak the language! Most people will be flattered (and perhaps amused) at your efforts to communicate in their language. Do not be intimidated! Avoid trying to translate Canadian slang as it will usually have no sensible meaning in another culture.
- Observe people to determine the level of physical contact that you should adopt at different stages of your social relationships. Hugging or holding hands may be frowned upon in some cultures. In others, you may be surprised at how "friendly" everyone seems! All cultures have different notions about personal space. Frequently your personal space will be much smaller than in Canada. Learn about this and respect it.
- What you consider to be a personal question may be small talk in another country. Similarly, some of your everyday questions may be considered highly inappropriate. Let your hosts guide the conversation to determine what is acceptable.
- Attitudes towards drinking and drunkenness vary from country to country and from person to person. In some places it may be impolite (or illegal) to drink, in others it may seem as though everyone imbibes. If you choose not to partake, most people will respect this. You may have to say that you cannot drink for religious or health reasons. You do have a choice. Never do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Do not ride with a driver who has been drinking.
- Bargaining over the price of goods and services is a common practice in many places but is unfamiliar to most Canadians. You may feel uncomfortable or cheap when bargaining but remember, it is often expected. Foreigners are often taken advantage of by merchants and charged more than a local customer. However, do not assume you are always being ripped off! Learn the language of bargaining and the acceptable price range. Be careful, though, not to insult the merchant or the goods. Especially insulting is the image of a "filthy rich foreigner" haggling over a few pennies.

Gender Concerns

Attitudes towards women vary from country to country. Some female foreigners will have a hard time adjusting to how people think about and act towards them. It is not uncommon to be honked, stared, gestured or jeered at, simply for being a foreign woman. Some may find this flattering but most find it annoying, maddening and threatening. For someone not used to this, it is hard to overcome. Eye contact or even smiling at someone may result in unexpected invitations. Some women feel as though they must stare at the ground when they walk down the street.

It is very important to remain culturally-sensitive in this regard. Respect local customs, practices and religion at all times. Dress and act appropriately. Maintain the perspective that these difficult experiences are part of the growth of cultural understanding, which is one of the important reasons for your going abroad.

If at any point you feel as though your safety is in danger or if you are harassed or assaulted, do not hesitate to seek help. See the [Staying Safe](#) section for more information.

If you are a male travelling with women, be aware of the additional difficulties they may face. While you cannot know what they are experiencing, you can be sensitive to their experiences. Do not view yourself as a protector of Canadian women but rather as someone who can help out through your own actions. For example, where you sit on a bus or who pays for a meal may be influenced by how the host culture view women.

Elaine Lee provides travel tips for women of colour in "Go Girl, The Black Women's Book of Travel & Adventure". Marybeth Bond shares her travel experience in her books, "Travellers' Tales: Gutsy Women, Travel Tips and Wisdom for the Road" and "Gutsy Mamas: Travel Tips and Wisdom for Mothers on the Road". "Journey Women" is a dynamic and diverse magazine which focuses on women travellers. You may find it at bookstores or on the web: www.journeywoman.com .

Racial, Ethnic and Religious Concerns

This section applies equally to all students going overseas, regardless of their citizenship or heritage. Canadians of African, Asian or First Nation descent living in a foreign country or culture will have different experiences than Euro-Canadians. Similarly, Euro-Canadians will have different experiences in Europe than elsewhere. Be aware of the historical relations between people of your race, ethnicity, religion and those of your host culture.

Reflect on the following in your journal:

- Did your culture (or a culture that resembles yours) ever oppress your host culture?
- Did your host culture ever oppress your culture?

Students from Canadian minority groups may feel exhilarated at being free from the racial or religious tensions at home. Others may meet familiar or new types of prejudice and have to learn new coping strategies. Few minority students conclude that these problems are sufficient reason for not going overseas. Be aware that even in seemingly liberal countries racism can be more overt.

Things will also be different if you look like the people where you are going. Locals may expect you to speak their language. You may be held to different standards of behaviour than your fellow Canadians. Your relationships with people of the opposite sex (both local and Canadian) may be more closely scrutinized.

Through all of this, the same basic standards of behaviour applies. Try to understand the perspective of the locals and do your best to have them understand your background. Know what you are getting into and prepare yourself accordingly.

Being Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgendered Abroad

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (glbt) people experience oppression everywhere in the world, though there are different levels of acceptance in different countries. Before you go, it is important to reflect on the culturally biased ideas and definitions of sexual identity and consider carefully how your identity as a glbt person may affect your relationships with host nationals, your cultural adjustment and your overall education abroad experience. Part of your pre-departure preparations should include reflecting on the larger context of acting on your glbt identity while abroad. What role as a visitor do you / should you have in the host culture? Does your right to be glbt in Canada conflict with your host country's religious or cultural values and traditions? How will you reconcile your human rights with the cultural values of your host society? Are there safety considerations which you should be aware of?

Before Leaving, Consider the Following:

- Cultures vary in terms of what is considered appropriate behaviour and how sexual identities are defined and understood. Learn as much as possible before you leave about the culture-specific norms of friendship and dating, styles of behaviour and general attitudes. Behavioural signals (such as eye contact, a smile, touching) may lead you astray in a foreign culture. For example, in several Middle Eastern countries hand-holding among males is a custom of special friendship and respect and does not imply homosexuality. Is it possible for you to contact (through e-mail, etc.) other glbt folks from

the host country to ask them specific questions?

- Obtain country-specific information on the support systems (meeting places, organizations, etc.) available in your host country. Are these appropriate for you? Do you visit similar places in your home community?
- Familiarize yourself with the laws of your host country. Homosexuality is illegal in many countries, and carries the death penalty in some. In some countries, safety may require you to hide your sexual identity. Inform yourself about country-specific laws on age of consent, travelling with print or other materials on sexual orientation, etc. If necessary, are you willing to hide your sexual orientation? Finding out about the laws of the host country, would you reconsider your options? Check out Amnesty International's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Network - <http://www.ai-lgbt.org> for contacts and information.
- If you are "out" in Canada, reflect on what it means to leave behind a support system of friends and family. Being glbt abroad has been described by some as a second coming out. How will you re-establish your identity overseas?
- For further information, talk with other people who have been in your situation abroad, preferably in your host country. See the "Resources" section for books that pertain to bi, gay, lesbian or transgendered travel.

Studying abroad is a time of personal growth and discovery. Many transformations in personal development and self-awareness can occur, prompted by the fact that the restrictions of the home culture have been removed. Returning home is therefore a time of transition which can be difficult.

Before re-entering Canada, consider:

- If you chose to come out while abroad, how will this affect your return to friends and family? Will you be able to re-integrate these relationships upon your return or will you need to find a different supportive community?
- Reflect upon how you may have changed as a result of your coming out.
- Consider the implications of coming out when back home. Often family and friends may want to dismiss your sexual orientation as temporary due to the experience abroad, rather than acknowledge a lifelong identity.

Say "Cheese"! Photography Abroad

Photography can be a window into another world. But photographing people from other cultures requires tact. A few cultures in the world see taking pictures as taking a piece of their spirit. Most people react to an unannounced photograph with disdain. How would you feel if someone just took your picture without asking?

The most memorable pictures are not of strangers on the street but of people with whom you have made some association. Take home a picture of all the friends you make overseas, in characteristic but natural poses. If you see some interesting people that you'd like to take a picture of, talk with them first. Being friendly not only gets you great shots but maybe some new acquaintances!

If you want to take pictures of strangers, make sure you ask them first, even if it's just a smile and a nod towards the camera. Of course, if they don't want you to take their picture, don't do it. You'll simply be giving a bad reputation to all camera-toting foreigners. In some places it may be expected that you pay a little for the privilege of taking a picture. Other times, the person may ask for a copy. If you promise to send one, make sure you do it!

If you insist on being candid about your people pictures, get a big lens, at least 200 mm, to put some distance between you and your subjects. But don't be surprised if, after all the culturally sensitive photographs you take, you end up being the subject of someone else's tourist shots. Remember that Westerners are not the only camera-toting tourists out there!

Keep in mind that some places or events, in some countries, may be taboo for photography; for example: railway stations, military activities, demonstrations or inside temples. You don't want to be arrested on suspicion of being a spy! If in doubt, ask.

For more tips on travel photography go to the resources section on [Photography Abroad](#)

Being a Canadian Abroad

What does it mean to be Canadian? Canada is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world yet many people around the world think of Canadians solely as European descendants. How will your experience abroad be different if you are of African, Asian, First Nation or other descent? A second generation African-Canadian would have a very different experience visiting Jamaica than a second-generation Euro-Canadian might. Ask others who have gone through a similar experience what it was like. Did the host culture treat them differently? Did they fit in as one of the crowd or did they stick out?

Perhaps you are a permanent resident living in Canada or a visa student visiting Canada. How does that change what has been said above?

As a student studying abroad you are a representative of both your institution and Canada. Reflect a bit about what this means to you and how you will present yourself to your host culture.

"Do you live in an igloo?" How other cultures perceive Canadians

You probably won't be asked if you live in an igloo. But in some countries the residents may know more about Canada than you do! Don't be surprised if you're asked some pretty tough questions. Hot topics about Canada include our environment and wilderness, our treatment of Aboriginals and Quebec separatism. In other places, the people may know nothing about Canada.

Ask yourself these thought-provoking questions:

- I hear Canada has no problems with racism or social conflict. Is this true?
- What is a beaver? Why is a big-toothed, flat-tailed rodent your national symbol?
- Why does Canada treat Aboriginal people the way they do?
- Canada is really part of America, isn't it?

Think about how you feel about some of the policies and problems in Canada. What would you like people from outside Canada to know about life in Canada?

Preparing Yourself: "What will they ask me?"

- What's the population of Canada?
- What does Canada mean?
- How big is Canada?

Expect lots of questions from the people you meet abroad. There's nothing more embarrassing than appearing to be ignorant about your own country.

Activity - Here's your chance to brush up on what you know about Canada.

Take a Canada Quiz on-line: http://canada.gc.ca/canadiana/quizzes_e.html

OR

Browse general information on Canada's history, geography, politics and culture: http://www.canada.gc.ca/canadiana/cdaind_e.html



Leaving People Behind

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