
Two Passport Photos to Pass-the-Port to Port-Saïd Square

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Abstract

This short essay begins with a personal narrative describing the taking of passport photos and the intimacy of that moment. It then moves into broader reflections on regimes of mobility and waiting. The essay shifts between the intimate act of taking passport photos, critical reflections on visa regimes, and the author's lived experience of traveling in Algiers, Algeria, ultimately culminating into a moment that gestures toward the possibility of divine intervention.

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Keywords

visas, colonialism, nation-states, borders, Algeria, Muslim belonging

Two Passport Photos

The passport photos below were taken on May 11, 2025, in Bangla Town, on Danforth Avenue, East Toronto. This was Mother's Day in so-called Canada. Although the photos shown here were originally taken in the 50 × 70 mm format used for Canadian passports, they were reprinted in 35 × 45 mm to meet the dimensions required for the Algerian tourist visa application. We had not planned to take these photos at the time but made an impromptu stop when I noticed the "Passport Photos" sign in the window of a Computer and Printing Store aptly named "Computer Service, Copy, Print, Fax, Scan."

The first photo shows Abdoul Malyck, who went first. His face is covered to protect his identity. I combed his hair with my fingertips as he looked at his reflection in the small mirror mounted on the wall, behind the white curtains of the tucked-in, improvised studio inside the small shop. The photo below is of me, Marycarmen, the author of this short love note to Algeria.

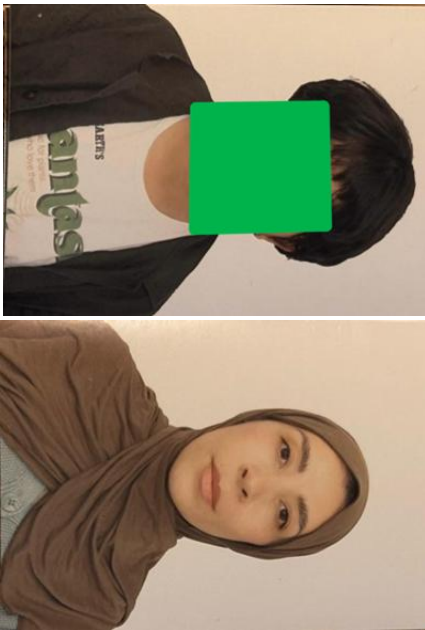


Figure 1. *Two Passport Photos.*

(Note: These passport photos are 50 × 70 mm, the size used for Canadian passport photos. I did not notice the size difference initially. We asked the

photographer to correct the size and print two copies. The 35 × 45 mm size captured only our faces, down to the neck.)

To Pass-the-Port

Libya, Mauritania, Mali, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Seychelles, Tunisia, Malaysia, and the Maldives are currently visa-exempt for their citizens travelling to Algeria. Canadian passport holders are required to apply for a visitor visa, a process I began in the spring of 2025. A form to fill out, an employment letter, proof of insurance, bank statements, proof of a return itinerary, and hotel reservations are some of the required documents. Carefully, I review each document on the checklist, place them in an envelope, and seal it before saying *Bismillah*.

Algeria's visa policy is based on reciprocity. It may be an intentional response to the restrictive mobility regimes imposed on Algerian citizens by powerful, wealthy, and neo-colonial states. For many in the west, having to apply and *wait* for a tourist visa can act as a deterrent to travel, specially those not accustomed to such procedures. Yet protracted waiting is a condition immigrants and refugees are familiar with. Shahram Khorsavi (2021) tells us protracted waiting and bureaucratic mystification make life unpredictable, producing uncertainties, anxieties, fears—leading one to question whether one is in control of their own life. Immigrant m(others) are especially familiar with this rehearsal of compliance; it is the cost of passage.

But this, for me, is quite different.

Unlike previous times, when I had meticulously read and reread application instructions; compiled documents; scanned them; filled in forms; photocopied IDs; given fingerprints, this time I felt profound satisfaction—joy, even. No longer was I learning again (and again) the quiet discipline required to prove one's legitimacy through letters, stamps, and signatures; through papers, papers, papers, always afraid to fail. Not this time.

Zimbabwe scholar Cetshwayo Zindabazewe Mabhena (2016) describes the passport as "a political and legal qualification, a distinguishing

classifier that separates border jumpers from legitimate border crossers and travellers” (para, 5). In this way, I am an impostor, a border jumper with the documents of a border traveller, a Global South Other carrying, largely by accident of geography and time, a Canadian passport. And so, I experienced a sense of joy when I went through the process of getting my passport photo taken. Is this a rare alignment of paperwork and justice?

In this moment, the weariness, the uncertainty of the administrative, procedural, and waiting weight of mobility quietly rotated, if only briefly, and even if toward me. Yes, if only briefly, the asymmetries of passport power were unsettled, perhaps just symbolically. Despite being the applicant, this felt like a form of border justice.

On July 12, 2025, Abdoul Malyck and I flew to Algiers from Barcelona. It was a short flight, but it gave me enough time to prepare.

To Port-Saïd Square



Figure 2: *The Casbah*. Casbah, July 14, 2025. Taken by Abdoul Malyck Shahzad-Lara. Taken on Ektar 100 film with a Minolta SRT-101.

It happened at noon on July 13. Abdoul Malyck and I had just argued. Our plans to walk up the Casbah changed unexpectedly, but when we found Tantonville Café, we were reminded that there is nothing a Ramy and a fine espresso can't fix. It was hot, our clothes sticking to our skin, and it didn't bother us much. We were sipping our drinks among locals; the heat was another quiet companion. In that moment, I wanted to be Algerian. Our clothes may have told a different story, but others knew we prayed

towards the Quibla. This shared orientation, both ontologically and figuratively, may have granted us belonging, if only for a moment.

We found Tantonville Café in Port-Saïd square, right next to the National Theater; these are the remnants of French colonial presence. In conversation, Abdoul Malyck and I imagine 1954 and onward: the Front de Libération Nationale, Petit Omar, Leila Djabali, Frantz Fanon, Boualem Rahal—the sophisticated, organized, and synchronized insurgency of the Algerian Revolution—and the explosions. “Your Abuelita was born in 1960,” I uttered quietly while sipping my second espresso.

Two women sitting next to us are also taking a break from the burning intensity of the sun. Both are dressed in black, including their head scarves. One of them is grandmotherly; she also had a cane. Her name I will not reveal here, or elsewhere. She felt uncannily familiar, not because of her voice or appearance, but because of her presence.

“Es-tu Tunisien?” the woman asked Abdoul Malyck.

“Tunisien? Non, Mexicaine et Pakistanais,” responded my son.

“MashAllah,” she said.

Just like at home in Mexico City, everything there felt intense; everything seemed familiar. I didn't know anything, but I knew everything.

My reader, I won't reveal who she is or what happened next, beyond this sparse telling, at once incomplete and sufficient. That day, Abdoul Malyck and I were shown, in the strangest of ways, a kind of divine intervention. In the end, our grandmother made a du'a for us, and we understood a little more, though not all.

Some things are never meant to be published, and the sacred place where she took us must remain just that. *MashAllah*, indeed, and *Alhamdulillah* for the two passport photos to pass-the-port to Port-Saïd Square.

References

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Acknowledgments

I dedicate this story to my father, José Luis, who shared with me his love for Algerian raï music. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, we wandered through Mexico City's flea market *La Lagunilla* hunting for burned CDs of Cheb Khaled, Cheb Hasni, Cheb Mammi, and Rachid Taha.

Author Biography

Marycarmen Lara-Villanueva holds a PhD in Social Justice Education from OISE, University of Toronto. Her research explores the intersection of visibility, race, and capitalism with a focus on the visual representation of Blackness and Indigeneity. She currently works in the public sector advancing equity through policy, research, and community engagement. A first-generation PhD graduate and immigrant m(other) of two, she is still recovering from the neoliberal academy.