

HOME IN AMSTERDAM

In this photo-essay series, Katherine Oktober Matthews explores the concept of 'home' in Amsterdam, and what it means to those who have moved here from all around the world.

VINCENZO, PALERMO, SICILY

I was born in a hospital... something different from here since the Dutch are normally born in their own homes. But we are different or, I don't know, maybe the Dutch are different. I'm Vincenzo, from Palermo.

People in Sicily are nice but they are too proud. They will tell you Sicily is the best place in the world. Of course that's not true! There are so many cultures, differences, and colors around the world -- and everything is as special as the things in Sicily. Maybe special doesn't exist at all, as a concept. Sicily has amazing sea and sunsets but there are so many other places around the world that I haven't experienced yet, how could I really miss my island?

Being Sicilian also means complaining a lot and nothing is ever your fault. Normally a lot of things are your fault but you like to complain anyway. Complaining in an unconstructive way makes you feel so good, doesn't it? It's so bad for the world but, for you, it's an amazing cathartic experience.

Of course you feel safest in the environment that you know, or that you like. And normally if you like the people, they will like you as well and you won't have so many problems. So, you see, I had to leave. Because I'm Sicilian, I like to complain.

I always felt like going away because I felt isolated from everywhere. It's not even easy to get to the other side of the island. And anywhere you want to go on the mainland of Europe -- we call it the continent -- you need to take a flight. You could also take a train; it's called "hope-travel" because you hope to arrive. It's something like 12 hours on the worst kind of trains. Here in Amsterdam, in half an hour you can be in another city that you've only ever heard about. I can take a train and in two hours I'm in Brussels and in four hours in Paris. I enjoy being abroad and going to the cities that I could never reach so easily before.

Being away also means that I can be around people who don't always have the same opinions as I do. In Sicily, you are considered to be either right or wrong, depending on if you're aligned with the majority or not. Here it's different, since it's such a mix of different cultures, it's impossible to be aligned. You can even change your perspective, if you know how to, which is great. It means I can always be un-aligned, not because of who I am but because of the environment. And because the environment doesn't choose things for me, I can do almost anything.

I can't really define home. It's like with love. When you start trying to define love, you're already talking too much! Maybe "home" is similar to that sensation you feel when, coming back from a frozen night, you go to sleep. It's still freezing outside but you are in bed. And in that moment, as you fall asleep, and it's warm and safe, you are at home in your dreamy darkness. This is home for me, this sensation around you, protecting you, making you feel warm.

Maybe I will never feel completely at home in one physical place, because it also depends on the people around me. The people are really important for me. Suppose one morning, nobody I know is around anymore... I probably would not recognize the place. But is it so good to feel at home somewhere? If you leave, then you are depressed and you miss it too much. Maybe it's better not to have a home at all.

Maybe I just feel like this because I didn't find love again, and I still don't have a family of my own. When you start having kids I guess the concept is different: home is not just a bed anymore. It's also playing with your kids, cooking with them, reading to them, looking through their eyes to discover forgotten things.

It always depends on what happens to you from day to day. Whatever I think now, could be quite different tomorrow.

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