**Conversations on Creative Climate Leadership Podcast**

Episode 4: CARE

**SPEAKERS**

Louis VI, Farah Ahmed, Ceyda Berk-Söderblom, Dawit Seto

**Farah Ahmed** 00:02

Welcome back to Conversations on Creative Climate Leadership. I'm Farah Ahmed from Julie's Bicycle, and I am guiding my good friend Louis VI through this journey to really find out what this means.

**Louis VI** 00:15

Farah, it’s definitely been a journey. It's been a quest. I'm learning as we go, but it's been really fun. Where are we going next?

**Farah Ahmed** 00:24

Well, we are going to explore **care**. We're going to find out a little bit more from our next guests, Dawit and Ceyda.

**Dawit Seto** 00:34

Hey everyone. My name is Dawit Seto. I am an African contemporary dancer and choreographer based here in Switzerland. I am originally Ethiopian. I'm Switz-Ethiopian. I'm currently working on a project about climate change and climate justice. The last recent project I had was a movement ritual with migrants from the Eastern Africa region who are based here in their new home, and working on their rituals about climate issues. The other project I was working on, again was about migrants who again came from East African region, which is, as you can imagine, heated by climate change, and disaster, war, conflict… and coming here to a new home, wanted to see what kind of practice we keep from home, in new home here in Switzerland.

**Ceyda Berk-Söderblom** 01:47

Hi, everyone. My name is Ceyda Berk-Söderblom, and I'm a cultural manager, festival programmer and curator. I have been working in arts and culture for more than 20 years. I was born and raised in Turkey on the west coast of the country, next to the beautiful Aegean sea. But for the last eight years, I have been living and working in Finland and Sweden due to my family, and also the work I do currently. My practice is based on transnational and transcultural collaborations. But currently I'm working for an international network of civic led cultural organisations, trans European, and managing an international consortium consisting of network members, to deal with how to diversify artistic processes and leadership structures and decision making structures in arts and cultural organisations to make them more diverse and representative of the societies we live in.

**Farah Ahmed** 03:01

Okay, let's get into it. Over to you, Louis!

**Louis VI** 03:05

Ceyda, Dawit, welcome to the podcast. First and foremost, we're very pleased to have you with us. This series is all about creative climate leadership and what that means. And I want to begin by focusing a bit on those words: creative, climate and leadership and what they mean to you, and how does that live in your day to day work?

**Ceyda Berk-Söderblom** 03:24

Well, actually, this is quite interesting, because I was working on an essay talking about non critical leadership and inclusive leadership for an organisation - an NGO I'm working for as a board member. I thought about those issues a lot. I mean, there is a kind of tendency that we value ‘leadership’ as a notion in many organisations. But when it comes to arts and culture, I started to develop a little bit of dislike with those terms. I have a feeling that as a sector which is driven by humanistic values, they are so much affected by the business terminology and how the organisations and structures are built around those. This notion of ‘leadership’ - the one that we need to follow, the one who decides on everything, it's a little bit far from my personal approach and perspective. In that sense, I want to see this as more collaborative. I think creativity and leadership have a lot to do with each other and learn from each other, and need to just free themselves from each other. But as a notion, leadership is a bit of a troubling terminology for myself.

**Louis VI** 04:44

Yeah it's funny. I've been waiting for and wondering which episode to talk to this. This subject of leadership, because obviously we need not just new language and new terminology, but a new way of approaching it. We've not had the best examples historically of what leadership means. We don't have it in the present now on a global scale, and leadership does imply, like an individuality, to something. Creativity, as I'm sure we'll both touch on in both your work and from what I've seen, is not so much about the individual, it's quite about the collaboration, whether that's collaboration between artists, or collaboration between audience and artists. But Dawit, speaking on that - how is creative Climate Leadership working in your day to day work? Is it something that's come up? Like Ceyda said, leadership is a bit of interesting language to use in it.

**Dawit Seto** 05:49

Exactly, exactly. But for me, I like the fact that ‘creative’ came along with ‘leadership’, and I think that's pretty much a justification for the word for me. Based on where I come from and where I grew up, leadership, as you also mentioned it earlier, it's not a good example that we had so far. Having ‘leadership’ and ‘creative’ together… fantastic words to say together. And to live, to practice with it. It brings so many possibilities - as Ceyda said - collaboration, and also doing some things together, the empathy and the sympathy, sharing knowledge. So many things came for me from the creative side of it. So, yeah, I think that's my short description of creative climate leadership.

**Louis VI** 06:54

That's a really nice way to put it. The creative is the balance to the leadership side. It's the ying to the yang of that. It’s interesting. Another guest that we had, Eliki Reade, said something that kind of speaks to this as well, saying, “we need to move a bit more artfully through the world”. And I think that's a quite similar thing to saying, you know, the creativity aspect of leadership is the balance. It's a little bit more, at least empathetic, to other things to be able to be creative. I feel like there's a degree of empathy that is needed. And that kind of brings me on quite nicely to the settings of these episodes, because each of our episodes is based around a word, which is a characteristic, we think, of climate leadership, and this episode is based around the word **care**. So be interested to know what you guys feel care means in your work. If we could explore that…

**Dawit Seto** 08:02

For me, one of the things when I talk about ‘care’ is to open up myself and to show, to have empathy and understanding with the community that I live in. It doesn't really matter that I am new, but I have a manifestation that's saying I have to show up a little bit and then tell about my stories, tell about my background, then people can understand and relate to what I am saying. So I think that's how I start working on care. For me, that's the beginning point.

**Louis VI** 08:40

It's funny, because in the global north, to speak on the idea of newness, the global north is somewhat only just catching up to the reality of day to day experience of climate change. And so there's a lot of people in the Global North going, “Oh, wow, this is new, that we're actually experiencing it”. Yet the global south has been, you know, living that as a reality for a long time. And from both of your work, it seems very important to platform the creativity of communities in the Global South across boundaries and borders. But why do you think it's important for people in the global north to experience these perspectives?

**Dawit Seto** 09:23

I think first of all, we have to show the reality, what's happening back there. We have to, I mean, it's not censored. It's living reality. Whenever I talk about the climate issue its as lived experience. It's not documentation - edited or to fit to people. That's from my heart, that we have to communicate. I feel like we have to communicate based on the true story, and then put it so it can be able to be accessed by everyone: the neighbours, or the government, or who's responsible to do anything about this. And lived experience is important as signed is also for me. Then we can talk about also migration and then inclusivity at the same time. And then that also brings another question, how many of us, as I am, a migrant myself… how many of us are here today because of climate issues? And then change the narration to be able to be accepted by the system today. So yeah, that's how I do it.

**Louis VI** 10:42

Is there anything you feel to add to that, Ceyda?

**Ceyda Berk-Söderblom** 10:46

I mean, I agree with what Dawit said, and I would like to maybe take a step back, just to have this helicopter view. I mean, as part of my long years of advocacy work, of course, issues that come with immigration and people's lives and stories, I, most of the time find myself to thinking the bigger picture behind so because no matter what issue we are discussing, whether it said it's a social, political or environmental… we need to acknowledge that the system we live in is unjust. The way power is distributed, how resources are controlled, who gets to decide? Who gets held accountable? You know, it's at the end all in the hands of a small elite. This is how I see it. And the system is built on a very single and very dominant narrative, which is Eurocentric, and it tries to maintain the control with different divisions in society, just to be able to keep the power, you know. And of course, after having lived in Nordic countries for a while, you finally see that. I mean the ones who control the resources are actually the ones making the rules. They extract, they pollute, they exploit, they take zero responsibility, and the rest of the world suffers. And this needs to be said. The burden of it, of course, if you look at it from the ecological point of view, is they outsourced the global south. So that's why the new perspectives are needed. That's why those narratives should be and conversations led by the global South, because those are the communities most affected. And you know, we know that if we are really serious about certain things, then it's about who exploits, should listen, take real action, take responsibility, compensate, and understand that the world cannot function in the way it has been functioning until now. So, this is maybe my contribution from the Nordic perspective, through my own observations.

**Louis VI** 13:10

Louder for those in the back! I've just got a smile on my face because it's something that just needs to be said over and over again. It needs to be more than said, really, but it's about the reality of the ridiculousness of such a tiny percentage of a planet destroying it for, yeah, 99% of the rest of us. And that's not even counting the more than Human beings and all the amazing biological entities that we share this planet with. We live in a very strange setup where that tiny 1% manages to persuade enough of Europe and the Western Eurocentric view that the enemy is ‘over there’. And it's insane, because the enemy is this 1% that lives, you know, just next door, and are the ones that are destroying stuff with, as you said, Jada, has very little accountability, as we and you know.

And in this series, I've had my mind awakened to what's going on in a lot of the Nordic countries, like particularly Norway. By one of the guests we had, Julie, who was saying that Norway puts a lot of energy into maintaining this image of being a very progressive country, and having lots of electric cars, yet is one of the biggest exporters, is opening and allowing, you know, so much more oil drilling. When we shouldn't be doing any more. And they're hiding the vast majority of that.

I think what we're speaking to is really relevant, particularly now, because, as you were saying that there's currently no legal frame, global legal framework, or consistent language or even infrastructures for people who are displaced from lands due to climate impacts. And some people use the term climate migrant or climate refugee. But in my opinion, these words have been used to villainise humans that are simply seeking safety. And you know, you apply it, as I always do, to nature and everything has some form of migration in its life, whether that's, you know, a bird that flies from west coast of Africa to to the spring in the south of the UK, or literally, you know, a small lizard or insect that migrates a short distance in a day. There's always movement and always migration, and these human borders have restricted both that natural cycle on Earth, but also leading us to get it very wrong. I think the figure is something about 1.2 billion people by 2050 that would be climate migrants or climate refugees, or whatever you want to call it, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace. It's taken me a long time to get to the question, but how could art and culture help us shape a new language around this and build a more empathetic narrative? You know, build a bit more care and structures that support people experiencing displacement for things that you know they are totally not responsible for?

**Dawit Seto** 16:50

I think for me, we need to facilitate a lot of dialogues. I mean, the first and then the last things for me is dialogues. I think we have to really, really work on empowering individuals and artists. Then I think also working on awareness and individual stories. These are the points that I can see that might bring a change to the table. In every language possible, because that's also another thing we have to understand, the culture and the ideologies, the manifestation of the climate, migrant refuges. So we have to really start having dialogues.

**Louis VI** 17:47

And as a dancer, your language is very much a somatic one, a somatic dialogue. So how does that help us navigate the trauma of these climate aspects, or the more difficult, nuanced conversations for ourselves and communities and bringing in people that may not yet have had that understanding or empathy.

**Dawit Seto** 18:11

I mean, as you can imagine, coming from very sunny every day, 35 degrees and coming here - minus five, minus seven, minus eight…!

**Louis VI** 18:22

Tell me about it.

**Dawit Seto** 18:25

I mean, for me, one of the ways I work is with body awareness. To rework on the body, also remembering the narration, reworking on the rhythms, rework on somatics, expression, attitudes, so and so, that's how I start working. And my focus is pretty much now, is working on rituals that we brought from the eastern African region, most of the migrants can easily relate to those topics. And also it's very interesting also for our neighbours here, because it's a quite new thing, and people are very curious to know. That's how I work on that, working on rituals and body awareness, yeah, making a connection between here and back in home. So.. making these things together.

**Louis VI** 19:31

It's something that I would love to experience or witness, because I guess also, there's a specialness of where you are coming from. Because a lot of what we're talking about is summarised by the word colonialism. But you - coming from a country that wasn't colonised - so you're bringing a lot of rituals, (though, you know, obviously the Italians tried!) but you're coming from a place with a lot of rituals that are uncolonised traditions, I'm guessing. How do you find people, like your neighbours where you are now, how do you find that people can connect to that - who it is very new for?

**Dawit Seto** 20:17

I think it's pretty much to do with the topics I am working on - climate issues. Most of my circles, my neighbours around the city where I live, most of them are active about climate issues. I think that has to do something with that it is also something new. And even though they heard about the rituals, I don't think many of them have access to really practice it. Yeah, they can read it, they can watch it. Some of them have the capacity to go and to visit some of these things. But I think they're open because I am close. I live in their own city. It's broadcasted here, and I am also working on making my home here, and to practice those rituals here. It's not only that I brought the Ethiopian or Somalian or that me being here and talking about climate issues and talking about the living, lived experiences, I think that's a big connection for them to be curious about this stuff.

**Louis VI** 21:32

Yeah, working on people's natural curiosity. And Ceyda, do you have anything to place to that? because I was going to ask you, continuing from what we're just speaking about, whether when, when cultural institutions work displaced communities and migrants, how do we make sure that the result in work and narratives give people choice about that kind of work that they want to make, rather than exploiting any lived experience or trauma?

**Ceyda Berk-Söderblom** 22:12

Well, I mean, thank you very much, Dawit, because it was so beautiful to imagine this non verbal communication between different beings. I mean, because we are also suffering a lot because of the language we use. And when I was listening to you, Louis, when you mentioned the terminologies, I also feel kind of confused about it. Of course there is a need for consistency, to use certain terminology in some reports, but they also carry weight, and shape the way people see others. It somehow reproduces certain stereotypes. And you know, these labels could become even so powerful that they overshadow a person's right to define themselves. If we think about, for instance, ‘climate migrant’ - I mean, it turns the real human into a statistic, and it's a kind of faceless crowd instead of recognising them as an individual with different communication, life stories, rights…

And how do we make things right? Maybe it's the place where arts and cultural organisations step in, and there is huge possibility there because I personally believe in the transformative power of arts. But how are we going to deal with those stories, and what are the ways to work with? I would say it's an important question, because, again, many arts and cultural institutions are built on long standing power structures. You know, there are certain narratives, artistic forms, even sometimes, national values, and how we approach and how we work with people with migration histories. I mean, is it a pre written, narrow narrative, for instance, the one that centres trauma in a way that can feel extractive rather than empowering?

And if we are serious about the really ethical part of the collaboration, are we able to shift the focus from telling stories about people to creating space with people and for people to tell their own stories on their own terms, you know? I think it's all about agency, how we deal with those issues. So people should have control over what they want to tell and what they want to express, not just to be expected to perform a struggle or a survival for an audience. If someone wants to make a work about it and about their lived experiences, it should be their own choice, not a kind of expectation placed on them because they are coming from certain geographies, or they are because they are migrant artists or cultural workers - so the only story they can say and tell and only work they can focus should be that style. It should be respected as an individual choice.

Also, maybe we need to ask about who benefits from that. And in arts and culture, there is a reality that we are gaining funding, visibility, credibility by showing some work of certain narratives, because of the funding system, because of what and why we do those things. But then, is there any fairness? I mean, one can look at even the compensation. One can see if these relationships are beyond just one off projects. And because if we don't really question ourselves in that way in the cultural sector, then we could become another maker in this cycle of exploitation. And because usually people are invited to share, but not to shape the narrative. You know, there are certain rules in which you are invited, but there is no proper care in making together. Therefore yes, collaboration and spaces for dialogue and long term commitments are needed. It shouldn't be because it's the time, because there is a crisis, or there is a thematic possibility, or there is funding opportunity, that those things are in focus. It should be a kind of more engaged and long term relationship with people, together with them, and giving the right agency to the owner of the stories, I would say maybe.

**Louis VI** 27:13

Well, I love what you said, that people are too often only invited to share, not to shape. And that's probably a really good thing to apply to almost all arts as an industry, because so often we've seen it so professionalised that often people talk about it in terms of success and exposure and money, rather than what the art has the ability to do, to change things for the better. And you know, at the core of it, art is something that is supposed to be a mirror to society. Nina Simone said it - so many artists have said it - if you're not holding a mirror to society, then it's not fully art. Yet, you know, in a way, the industry discourages that so much, just you spoke to…

Do you think that we're in danger of becoming disconnected from the more than human world that we, at the core of it, came from as humans? Because I think there's a real disconnect going on, where people think humans are not part of nature. And there's a beautiful saying… I'm got very close friends that are Indigenous Kichwa in the Amazon, in their so-called Ecuadorian part of the Amazon, and they say *Kawsak Sacha* which means the living forest, but not in the sense that you would be like, Oh, the forest is just alive. It's that, no, the forest itself is a being, just as you are being - just as a mushroom and Mycelium is a being, and the frog and the river and everything. How can I frame this? Does that come across more easily in somatic, especially in dance, than words?

**Dawit Seto** 29:29

I think we are very different people, our shape, our colours, with so many different things that we have. But we also have so many things in common to share. And for me, the way I can see this is, yes, it's easy to connect through the somatic language, that can easily go together. But also, is a group of people who was, who's not really interested in those issues. But as long as we have to live together and we have to move together, I think we have to use both languages in the same topics. We have so many people who are really interested in the movement and working on these rituals and so on. But we don't want to leave the people who're not really interested in those movements but still who have been affected by those issues, who really also want to contribute towards this topic. So it's, for me, it always has to be both sides. And that's one of the reasons whenever I do, we do, the ritual - you can sit, you can listen to what we're going to talk about. That's the methodology that I use. So I would say it should be both.

**Louis VI** 31:12

You know, I'd love to imagine a near future where people understand the intimacy we have with the natural world that we're intrinsically part of. We are breathing in and out of trees every fifth breath. And I think when you really get actually deep in the reality of it, it would make it much harder to see something like a tree as a resource. You don't just see the tree for the wood, but you see it as a universe of many life forms and a food source and a natural engineer that is protecting the planet and playing its part.

It feels like the real second word of this particular episode, alongside **care**, should be **language**. I feel like it's been a real discussion about language and how powerful words can be, both destructively and creatively, and you've both spoken really amazingly about that. There's so much more to go, but we're getting near to having to wrap up. There's one question I want to ask first, and I think it brings it round in quite a nice way… I'd love you guys to describe a natural place or or a nature experience in the places that you're from that you always go to, that you think about when you think of nature.

**Ceyda Berk-Söderblom** 32:53

Maybe I should revisit this question by myself all the time… I think you took me to early memories of my childhood, when with with my grandma we were going at a certain time in Spring to pick some oregano… because in the place where I come from in the East Asian region of Turkey on the West Coast, we have beautiful different types of oregano that you can pick a certain time. I always enjoyed it because it was the time that she was showing me how to pick, not to pull, the whole plant. Just to be careful with the tip of the leaves. And which one that I can collect, which one I should leave, because they are quite fresh. And the smell, of course, I can recognise that smell wherever I go! It's the smell of oregano, I'm so used to. I can say that, yes, there must be something from that part of the world that I was born.

**Louis VI** 34:09

That's beautiful. I can smell the oregano now! Dawit how about you?

**Dawit Seto** 34:14

It puts me also to ask myself in the meantime - where is it? Where is it? Where is it? Where is it? Interesting. So the city I live near, I mean, if you know Bern, there's a really beautiful river around the town. And in summertime we swim in the river. Back at home, some years ago, there was a river in the city I grew up in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. It was the first time I started swimming in the river. And after 12 years, 13 years, going back to that river, the river dried out. And whenever I'm here in summertime, when I see the people swimming in this river, it just reminds me it might get dry. And it always makes me just make a connection between those two rivers… financially and geographically, they're not really related, but just there was a connection for me in those two rivers, the dried one and then the still blue river going around the town.

**Louis VI** 35:36

Wow, thank you for sharing that. That's that's a powerful metaphor for this whole episode, I think. And rivers, rivers are quite good at doing that. I think rivers are quite good at showing what's really happening, because they're constantly moving, yet also constantly present or not, they really show you what's happening upstream and downstream. So to speak. I think that's a beautiful way to end the episode. So yeah. Ceyda, Dawit, thank you so much for coming on to this podcast and having a beautiful conversation with me.

**Dawit Seto** 36:20

Thank you very much for having us.

**Ceyda Berk-Söderblom** 36:23

Thank you.

**Louis VI** 36:31

That was one of my favourites so far. That was amazing. And, you know, shouts to them for being so open. I feel like we really got taken on a journey by them through both the emotion, but also, the language behind a lot of what we're talking about. I think, yeah, Ceyda made such good point, you know, challenging, and it was, it was a relief to hear it, because I've been feeling it a bit, but challenging the idea of the word leadership, because, you know, we've not had the greatest example so far, and what that even means. And maybe we need to move away from this individualistic idea of leadership.

**Farah Ahmed** 37:08

Yeah. I mean, we can. We can all lead. We can all take these words that we're learning about and put them into action, put them into practice. And we don't need to wait for some person who's been elected or in charge of this company to do it for us. We all have that capacity.

**Louis VI** 37:28

And I love how she challenged the hierarchical nature of that, and I think that is something that we really maybe need to look at as humanity and why leadership needs a hierarchy. Just because someone is leading isn't something that is ‘above’. It might mean leading by being totally collaborative. Do you know what I mean? Or or by knowing when to step back, or knowing that you're not alone. You don't have to do this thing alone.

**Farah Ahmed** 38:05

I mean, the way that some you know animals operate in nature is when you might have a leader at the front of a pack, but you also have somebody at the back that's looking out for the vulnerable ones in the middle, you know, how animals travel is, is also a way of, you know, exploring these different roles that we all have in leadership.

**Louis VI** 38:34

And, yeah, it comes back to the key word of that, which was care. I think Dawit spoke really beautifully to that. I mean his story about the river both in Switzerland where he lives, and the river back home in Ethiopia and how that's changed, and how he just quite profoundly, but quite simply explained that change. And wondering whether people know that change is coming for them as well. And I've read quite a mad tweet that was wondering, and - sorry to get so deep with this - it's quite mad - are they? Are we wondering, or just expecting? So that climate change is something that's happening there; that you're watching other people film, until it just gets closer and closer, until you're filming it on your phone or you're experiencing it. And is that how it's going to run before people start acting?

What's key in that is having people like Dawit, having people like Ceyda, who have experience of it and are bringing it, and like him, putting it into movement, into somatic dance and stuff. But also into language that people need to empathise with. And I think to be able to do that requires a great deal of empathy for people and I feel like they really hammered home that feeling of ‘we all have a shared common thread that can be picked up on…’ there's more in common than there is different between us. And I think that that's a beautiful thing to push forward on, on creative climate leadership. I think that is amazing, and maybe we need to switch that word leadership. Creative climate, something.

**Farah Ahmed** 40:34

That's a great provocation. Before we wrap this episode, Louis, I wanted to ask you, what is a place in nature that means something to you?

**Louis VI** 40:43

Oh damn, there's so many, it's so hard! That mean something to me? Is this what I've been saying to other people - this is so mean. It's a mean question! There's so many places that mean things to me, but I think, yeah, where, where my ancestry comes from in on my father's side, in Dominica, it's such a special place, and there's so much untouched and pristine forest, and, you know, there's rivers, and there's just one moment that I remember just swimming in a river there and being able to open my mouth and drink the water as I swam. And I don't think I've ever been able to do that in my life. And it's because the water there is so clean, you know, it's a volcanic island. It's untouched in terms of, like, being polluted. You know, people just use the river very respectfully, and it's coming from the mountains, and you know, you're surrounded by green and you're sharing the river with fish and land crabs and birds and herons and parrots and butterflies and everything like that. And it just feels like this is what it should be like. This is it. I mean, whoever thought it was a good idea to pollute a river? It's crazy that we don't prioritise having fresh air and fresh water and clean nature and abundant nature around us. It's kind of a sickness. We've definitely prioritised the wrong things as a global society. So yeah, Dominica, particularly this place, and particularly this river that's quite far inland. Also there's another set of waterfalls - one side of the waterfall was freezing cold water, and the other side is boiling hot, because it's coming straight from the deep mantle of the Earth. It's like sulphur springs coming out. So you can go between a hot, boiling hot and a freezing cold water within metres. It's a pretty magical place. And, you know, everywhere used to be like that, and it can get back like that.

**Farah Ahmed** 43:03

Amazing. That sounds beautiful. And yeah, really, when we think about care and we think about empathy, that also extends these beautiful spaces and the rivers and the more than human world out there.

That was a really, really beautiful moment to end this on, Louis. Thanks for listening and join us next time on Conversations On Creative Climate Leadership.

Thanks for listening to Conversations On Creative Climate Leadership. It's a podcast from us here at Julie's Bicycle, a non profit mobilising the arts and culture to take action on the climate, nature and justice crisis. Big thanks to our funders and partners who've supported the work of the creative Climate Leadership Network and the making of this podcast: Pro Helvetia and Stiftung Mercator Schweiz for CCL Switzerland, as well as the European Cultural Foundation’s Culture of Solidarity Fund, and Porticus. And a thanks to our host, Louis VI, who's a member of EarthPercent, the music industry's Climate Foundation, who support JB's work on climate action with the music community. Thanks for listening.