

# Dealing with the Past: Aspects of Trauma and Healing

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## Self-Care as Collective Healing

A dozen of us sit in a circle on soft, colourful cushions. The airy, sun-filled space—on an unassuming street in Phnom Penh—is our studio for the next several hours. Ellen Steinmüller, a German dance therapist, smiles kindly at us, sharing invaluable words of encouragement as we begin: “Everyone is a dancer.”

I was fortunate to take part in Ellen’s dance therapy workshop as part of the conference “Dealing with the Past: Healing the Trauma” organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in July 2018. It was a welcome activity after two intensive days of speeches, panels, conversations, and performances focused on this timely, admittedly intensive topic. For several hours, she guided us through healing exercises as we stomped, slid, and twirled around the room, expressing our inner worlds. We closed the session entering the circle one-by-one, metaphorically leaving something behind.

The emphasis on self-care was a recurring theme I observed in formal presentations and lunchtime conversations, one that provided a profound reminder: In order to care for others, we must care for ourselves. In airplane speak: put your mask on first. As I watched three young Cambodian dancers—the New Cambodian Artists—perform in an open-air theatre alongside my conference colleagues, it occurred to me that the contemporary dance pieces told stories with movement that we had told during the conference with words. Their choreography illustrated the process from suffering to healing.

In Phnom Penh—as in many post-conflict locales—life must go on, but confronting history is a daily inevitability. Despite the colourful energy, beautiful sites, kind people, there are constant reminders: Pol Pot books in every bookstore, brochures for tours of the Killing Fields, and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in the midst of the city, where survivors sit on-site prepared to share their stories. During my first visit to Cambodia in 2014, I was fascinated by the coexistence of past and present. It was, perhaps, the same fascination that led me to (and kept me in) Poland for nearly a decade, where I first visited to study the Holocaust and continued to visit, live, and work in for a decade.

I had the opportunity to elaborate on the role of public spaces at the conference during a panel titled “Can museums be spaces for healing?” alongside Holocaust researcher Natalia Sineaeva-Pankowska and Director of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum Chhay Visoth, moderated by psychologist Sotheary Yim. Presenting on several museums in Europe, Asia, and the United States, I aimed to recognize the physical spaces (or lack thereof) at museums that serve to support self-care and collective healing. The White Lotus Room at S21—a quiet meditative room furnished with cushions and filled with soft music—is one such example I admire.

Since the 2017 conference “Dealing with the Past: Engaging in the Present”, I thought often of a quote by Sotheary: “The right listener will help you heal.” It was a reminder that the source of healing can be the most seemingly ordinary moments of human connection or in an unexpected physical space. This year, those moments took place for me during formal and informal aspects of the conference as well as in a makeshift dance studio, with strangers, in the absence of words.