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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Cohen, E. (2012). Flooded: an auto-ethnography of the 2011 Bangkok flood. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, *5*(2), 316-334. https://doi.org/10.4232/10.ASEAS-5.2-8

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Flooded: An Auto-Ethnography of the 2011 Bangkok Flood

Erik Cohen[1]

Citation Cohen, E. (2012). Flooded: An Auto-Ethnography of the 2011 Bangkok Flood. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 5*(2), 316-334.

In this personal account I report my perceptions, experiences, and conduct during the 2011 Bangkok flood, in which my home and neighbourhood have been badly inundated and damaged. Therefore, I draw on auto-ethnography as an increasingly popular, though controversial qualitative methodology in social sciences. Though personal, the account has some broader implications, deriving primarily from the examination of the relationship between my perceptions and conduct in the disaster and my life experiences and present social position, as set against the perceptions and conduct of my Thai wife, our neighbours, and the broader community. The contrast throws some light on an aspect of Thai culture rarely discussed in the literature: the Thai response to disaster.

***Keywords**: Auto-Ethnography; Bangkok 2011 Flood; Disaster; Floods; Home*

In dieser persönlichen Darstellung berichte ich über meine Wahrnehmungen, Erfahrungen und mein Verhalten während der Überschwemmungen 2011 in Bangkok, in denen mein Heim und die Nachbarschaft überschwemmt und schwer beschädigt wurden. In diesem Zusammenhang stütze ich mich auf die Autoethnografie als zunehmend populäre, wenn auch umstrittene qualitative Methode in der sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschung. Trotz des persönlichen Zugangs einer Autoethnografie lässt diese breitere Schlussfolgerungen zu, die sich hauptsächlich aus der Betrachtung der Beziehung zwischen meinen Wahrnehmungen und Verhalten während der Katastrophe sowie meinen persönlichen Erfahrungen und meiner sozialen Stellung im Gegensatz zu den Wahrnehmungen und Verhalten meiner thailändischen Ehefrau, unserer Nachbarn und der Community ableiten lassen. Dieser Kontrast wirft Licht auf einen bisher in der Literatur wenig diskutierten Aspekt der thailändischen Kultur: der thailändischen Antwort auf Katastrophen.

***Schlagworte**: Autoethnografie; Bangkok 2011 Überschwemmung; Heim; Katastrophe; Überschwemmungen*

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doi 10.4232/10.ASEAS-5.2-8 www.seas.at SEAS

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Preamble

"We are not interesting enough to be the subject matter of sociology," says Sarah Delamont (2007) in her critique of auto-ethnography; I agree – but some of our experiences, if properly presented and interpreted, might be. All my professional life I was what post-modernists call a 'realist': I separated my studies from my life, and kept myself out of my publications. In retrospect, this may have been a shortcoming or a mistake – for a reflective analysis of my own position in the field, or of some crucial events in a rather complex life, could have improved the quality of my work and helped towards a better understanding of myself. When the recent floods in the Bangkok neighbourhood – where I now live – caught up with me, I made a belated attempt to write this account of the event and of my experiences as an auto-ethnographic essay.

Introduction

Auto-ethnography is an increasingly popular (Ellis & Boechner, 2000; Macilveen, 2008; Wall, 2006), though controversial (Delamont, 2007), qualitative methodology. It was born as a way out of the *crisis of representation* in late modern anthropology (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Holt, 2003), and as a post-modern attempt to break the dichotomy between the researcher and his/her objects of representation (Butz & Besio, 2009). Auto-ethnography was meant to serve as a reflexive and indeed, therapeutic medium for the author, while at the same time illuminating the culture which he/she studies (Ellis et al., 2011; Holt, 2003; Wall, 2006). Though expressly subjective, claims have been made for particular criteria by which its reliability, validity, and generalisability could be judged (Ellis et al., 2011).

The focus of the proponents of auto-ethnography is on the researcher and his/her position and involvement in the field – an emphasis which has been criticised for prompting (young) researchers to be more concerned in their reports with themselves than with the subjects of their study (Anderson, 2006, pp. 385-386). But there are situations outside the research context which may call for auto-ethnography, particularly those in which a researcher is caught serendipitously in a dramatic event, which he/she is able to enlighten in an auto-ethnographic essay, though he/she had not studied it systematically. I found myself in such a situation when I was flooded out of my home in the course of the 2011 catastrophic floods in Thailand.

I had no intention to write about the event at the time of the flood's inception, and started to reflect about my experience only at a late stage of the event. Rather than offering a systematic analysis of the complexities of a major flood disaster, I will straightforwardly tell the story of my trajectory through the floods in a small corner of that huge catastrophe: in a housing estate in an outer district of the city of Bangkok.

Personal

My personal background is significant for the elucidation of the following account. I was born in Yugoslavia in 1932 and immigrated to Israel in 1949. I spent several years in the army and became a reconnaissance officer. I studied, and later taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for more than 40 years, as a professor of sociology and anthropology. But I had also a long acquaintance with Thailand, where I have been conducting research since the late 1970s; in the early 2000s, after retirement, I moved to live there permanently. My wife is Thai, but I am nevertheless a foreigner in Thailand, of a permanently-temporal status, whose formal expression is the need to annually renew my retirement visa.

The housing estate in which we live, *Senaniwet Khon Khan 2* (Senaniwet Second Project), is inhabited by lower-to-upper middle-class Thai families; there are only two to three Westerners around, married to Thai women. Though I have conducted research on a wide variety of topics in different parts of Thailand (e.g. Cohen, 1991; 1996; 2000; 2008), and have a broad acquaintance with its culture and history, I have never considered doing research on our neighbourhood, and neither developed a wide local social network, nor became much involved with community affairs.

I had, however, previous personal experience with floods, caused by heavy monsoon storms, in both the slum in which I did research in the early 1980s (Cohen, 1988) and in the housing estate in which I now live, where a heavy rainfall may turn the *soi* (lane) in front of our house, in the words of the son of a visiting friend, into a 'river'. But the 'river' always dried up in a day or two. That experience influenced my opinion that the 2011 flood, if it ever reached our neighbourhood, would be similarly transient.

I was involved in the study of tourism in the 2004 tsunami disaster in Southern Thailand (Cohen, 2007, 2008, pp. 23-51, 2009), but had no personal experience of the

tsunami disaster; my work was based on secondary materials. I did not feel comfortable to do fieldwork in the stricken region after the event: to study people in a disaster of those proportions seemed improper to me. However, when floods struck the town of Pai, which I had previously studied for several years (Cohen, 2006), I rushed there and did a comparative study on the tsunami and flash floods (Cohen, 2007). Hence, when the 2011 floods in central Thailand turned out to be a major disaster, I again found a systematic comparison with the tsunami attractive, though that event was much too complex to be studied by a single researcher without institutional support.

However, as the floods reached Bangkok and eventually our neighbourhood, they provided an opportunity to experience a disaster first-hand, though it was incomparably milder than the tsunami. As the event progressed, I realised that an account of my personal experiences and of my trajectory through the floods could contribute to contemporary disaster studies from a different perspective than that deployed by 'realist' researchers.

The 2011 Floods

The study of disasters has in recent years moved from the periphery to the centre of sociological interest (Tierney, 2007). Natural disasters have in the past been largely taken for granted, and studies focused narrowly on the management of their consequences. Recent work on disasters, however, has stressed the extent to which 'natural' disasters, even rare and unexpected ones, are to a significant extent socially produced (Oliver-Smith, 2002; Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 1999). Indeed, even the effects of a unique and unforeseeable natural disaster such as the tsunami in Thailand have been considerably aggravated by human transformation of the coastal zone of the Andaman Sea from mangrove forests to tourist resorts (Cohen, 2008, p. 49). Anthropologists have also shown that repetitive 'disasters' frequently constitute part of a society's habitat, and are expected and adapted to by the affected populations (Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 2002, p. 8).

The central plains of Thailand have in the past regularly experienced heavy flooding during the monsoon period; their population was well adapted to them, by con-

structing houses on stilts and using boats for transportation. The well-known Thai architect Sumet Jumsai (1988) has in fact characterised Thailand as an "aquatic society" and argued that its settlements in the past functioned as "amphibious communities" (Jumsai, 2011). However, the construction of dams with huge reservoirs, the creation of a network of irrigation canals, and the more recent landfills for the establishment of massive industrial estates and housing developments in the huge Bangkok metropolitan area, transformed the ecological and hydraulic conditions of the central plains (Na Ayuthaya, 2011), turning even regular floods into potential disasters. Hydraulic management thus plays a central role in the prevention and management of floods, but is ridden by rivalries between authorities with conflicting priorities and interests (e.g. "BMA gives," 2011).

In 2011, the annual monsoon rainfall was exceptionally heavy, with several major storms arriving in the later part of the monsoon season. Between September and November, catastrophic floods hit the central plains of the country, causing a considerable loss of life and enormous damage to the country's infrastructure and economy. According to various reports, about 600 people lost their lives in flood-related accidents, 28 of Thailand's 78 provinces were flooded (Chongkittavorn, 2011), about 10 million *rai* (2.5 million acres) of cultivated land destroyed (Suvanaporn, 2011), and seven major industrial estates inundated (Kertbundit, 2011), causing the closure of 1,700 factories (Chongkittavorn, 2011). The business sector lost an estimated THB 1.3 trillion (about USD 43.3 billion) in damages and revenues ("Businesses lost," 2011).

The huge disaster elicited a fierce controversy regarding the question whether the floods were due to natural causes or to hydraulic mismanagement (e.g. Kertbundit, 2011; Praiwan, 2011); and if the latter was the case, who bore the responsibility for the tragedy. This controversy was carried on along the lines of the political split, which has divided the country for the last five years and even engendered a politically-inspired conspiracy theory by representatives of the recently elected government against its previous incumbents ("Abhisit fires," 2011).

That government, headed by Yingluck Shinawatra (the sister of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, deposed in the 2006 military coup) was as yet little experienced to deal with a crisis of such proportions. As the crisis worsened, the government put up a *Flood Relief Operations Command* (FROC), intended to coordinate the flood management efforts; but this body was soon submitted to severe criticism and declared incompetent

to take hold of the situation (Achakulwisut, 2011a; "FROC worsens," 2011; Yoon, 2011). Individual FROC members were accused of pushing flood relief priorities in different directions, according to their political interests, preventing the formation of a coherent policy (Yoon, 2011). FROC became the butt of jokes in the foreign language press, especially after its own headquarters, on Don Meuang Airport north of Bangkok, was itself flooded and its members had to flee to new headquarters in the city (Sheldon, 2011).

While a study of the Thai 'flood politics' is beyond the aims of this account, it is important to point out that the various interested authorities made contrasting predictions with regard to the progress of the floods, and especially on their expected impact on Bangkok and its various districts. These varied between promises that there would be no flooding in the city, to warnings that all of it might be eventually flooded ("Flood barriers," 2011). Such contradictory predictions created considerable uncertainty and confusion in the urban population, including in our neighbourhood, which, in turn, affected my own disposition towards the threat.

Waiting for the Flood

I followed the news of the slow advance of the flood through the central plain towards Bangkok without much personal concern. As the waters reached the provinces of Nonthaburi and Phatumthani in the north of the capital, inundated several major industrial estates, and caused an increasing loss of life, I still did not assume that our housing estate would be threatened, even if the waters penetrated the city. That assumption was based on the topographical location of the estate: There were no waterways, such as brooks or major *khlongs* (canals), in our immediate vicinity, while the estate was surrounded by open, unused land that I believed to be capable of absorbing any amount of water reaching our area. Having a naive image of floods as a 'natural' flow of water, according to the lay of the land, I was unaware of the possibilities of manipulation of that flow by the authorities, or of other routes – like drainpipes – by which the water could slowly progress southward. Hence, I remained optimistic that we should be spared.

At the outset of the crisis I was also, somewhat naively, influenced by the authorities' reassurances that Bangkok would be safe. But these proved increasingly unreli-

able. A plan to save the capital by deflecting the approaching waters to the rivers Bang Pakong to the east, and Ta Chin to the west of the metropolitan area badly failed, apparently because the gradient of the flat land was so low that the waters would not flow into the designated direction.

Panicky voices from individual FROC officials consequently announced that all districts of Bangkok were in danger of being swept by the floods ("Flood barriers," 2011). The governor of Bangkok, who had at first hoped to protect the city as a whole, now concentrated his efforts on the salvation of its central business district and prestigious residential quarters ("BMA tries," 2011).

However, I remained disinclined to take the danger of the flooding of our housing estate seriously; this attitude was to some extent a reaction to what appeared to me as an exaggerated preoccupation with the threat by the women in the neighbourhood. I perceived their concern as hysteria and as a welcome distraction from the monotony of their everyday lives, saying to my wife that some of them might regret if the floods did not materialise. In a contrarian disposition, I denied that there was any significant threat to our area.

In fact, the information on the threat to our neighbourhood was, as elsewhere, unreliable and erratic. During the later part of October there were daily rumours that the flood was about to arrive on the next day or night, however, these proved to be false, reinforcing my conviction that nothing would happen. The uncertainty resulted in a range of responses to the possible threat on part of our neighbours: a few built a protecting wall in front of the gate to their house and left (Photo 1), some blocked their gates by sandbags (Photo 2), several acquired movable pumps to drain their yards, while the rest did not take any precautions. I was reluctant and unwilling to start any preparations towards the flood, believing that they were an unnecessary effort.

My wife, however, proved more prudent. Even before we departed for a conference to India on October 11, she had insisted on purchasing some sandbags, which I reluctantly placed behind the gate of our house on the eve of departure; but we found the house dry upon return a week later. This reinforced my optimism that nothing would happen anymore, expressed in an e-mail to my daughter on October 17, upon returning from India: "Our house has not yet been flooded, and there seems to be a declining chance that it will in the next few days." Even as the waters were about to

enter Bangkok, on October 22 ("Deluge reaches," 2011), I still firmly believed that they would not pose a serious threat; as I wrote to my son: "The water from the north will enter BKK today, but there will probably be little flooding." Ironically, afraid that we would not have a chance to see the flood, we in fact went to look at the first gushing of the flood water into the neighbouring urban district of Bang Khen.

But at the end of October the unexpected happened: dirty water started to gush from the gutters, slowly spreading and rising to flood our *soi*. This was new to me; I knew that floods can be caused by rains and overflowing rivers or canals, but not that they could come from underground – from the drains. I still did not believe that those waters could get very high, considering the open spaces surrounding the estate, and thought that a few sandbags at the door of the house would protect its interior; but I consented to my wife's insistence to move some possessions from the lower to the upper floor of our house, though I refused to carry upstairs a heavy cupboard, telling her flippantly that I would buy her a new one if this one would get destroyed by the flood (which it indeed did).

Leaving

As the flood threatened the city, many middle-class Bangkokians started to leave, either to stay with family up-country or in the hotels and resorts in the unaffected areas around Bangkok (Ngamkhan & Bangprapa, 2011); while foreign tourism withered, Pattaya, Hua Hin, and other near-by sea-side locations enjoyed a boom in domestic and expatriate refugee-tourism (Katharangsiporn, 2011; "Locals fleeing," 2011). Many of our neighbours had left prior to the arrival of the flood, while those who installed movable water pumps in their yards drained their property day and night. On October 31, as the water in our *soi* rose inexorably, we also decided to leave. The timing was determined by my wife: She wanted to get out as long as it was still possible to pass through the rising waters by our car.

I packed just a few personal belongings and some materials for my work, believing, on the basis of previous experience, that the waters would recede in a few days. Budget hotels in the city itself were already almost fully occupied by people like ourselves. We found a room in a cheap hotel nearby, and, turning the hotel room into a

temporary home, soon settled down into some kind of routine: work during the day, exercise in the evening, dining in still open restaurants. Since much of north-eastern Bangkok was flooded, we desisted from going to other parts of the city, staying and exploring the area around the hotel. We made, among others, a visit to a nearby *khlong*, with a slum of long-time Muslim in-migrants along its banks, which we had never even noticed before when passing through the area. We also discovered, just behind our hotel, in an unlikely, run-down area of workshops and mostly lower class habitations, the luxurious, high-walled, and well-protected compound of Thailand's present Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatra. The move to the hotel thus opened to us sights in the vicinity of our home, which we had previously been completely unaware of.

Our housing estate was declared an evacuation zone by the urban authorities soon after we had left. Lying on low land, it was reported to be one of the more seriously affected areas of the city. A day or two after leaving, we visited the estate. The transformation in the appearance of the familiar site was striking. The street into the estate looked like a *khlong*, with waters at places 70 to 80 centimetres high, and still rising. I began to realise that our 'exile' was going to last much longer than we had initially expected.

An emergency post, staffed by local volunteers, police, and later on, soldiers, was established at the entrance to the flooded area, which soon became a meeting place for socialising and exchanging information. People waddled from there through the murky waters, and were occasionally helped by volunteers, with vehicles fit to pass through the flood waters. The following day we also put on shorts and started to waddle towards our house (Photo 3), until a volunteer picked us up. The water in our *soi* was knee-high; against my previous conviction that the house would remain dry, the water had in fact flooded the lower level of the house, at a height of about 30-40 cm, damaging most of the furniture we had not moved to the higher level. I took a few photos (Photo 4), but there was nothing else we could do.

The neighbourhood had died down; most households were abandoned, shops closed up. Our *soi* was virtually deserted. But despite the call for evacuation, not all residents of the housing estate had left; a few hundred remained, mostly in the lower-middle class areas of the estate. The inhabitants adapted to the situation remarkably soon. In a few days, the flooded area bustled with floats, boats of all kinds

(Photo 5), and even a few motor boats, some volunteering to carry passengers to their homes, and at least one person ferrying people for a fee along the flooded streets. Volunteers, and increasingly the army, supplied those who stayed behind with food, water, and transportation. Along the main road in front of the housing estate, a lively market for emergency goods appeared: Hawkers established stalls, selling sandbags, plastic boots and overalls, and plastic and rubber boats; elsewhere even outboard motors were offered for sale on the roadside.

With no prospect to return home soon, we decided to take a previously planned trip to the north-east of the country on November 10. Preoccupied with other matters, I gave little thought to the floods, but during the trip I decided, following a conversation with a colleague, to write up this account.

I was hoping that we would be able to re-enter the house soon after our return. This, however, again proved over-optimistic. We went to the house to check on the damage; since our previous visit, the waters had started to decline, leaving behind much dirt and broken furniture. In a disturbing contrast with the chaos beneath, we found the upper floor still orderly, just as we had left it. Appalled, we departed, waddling in the dirty water until the ferrying boatman took us back to the post.

There was nothing to do but wait. We settled down again in the nearby hotel, thinking of another trip, but the enthusiasm with which we had gone away the first time had faded; rather, we followed the annoyingly slow recession of the water in the estate. At the entrance post a kind of routine had settled in, after about three weeks of flooding. The emergency services continued to operate, but the hustle of the boats along the flooded lanes gradually stopped. The army brought in heavy trucks, which regularly plied the affected area to assist people to travel to and from their homes (Laohong, 2011). We took a truck a few times to check the water at the house. The spirits among our co-travellers appeared high: In sharp contrast to the helpful but serious young soldiers who accompanied us on the trip, the locals were usually chatting, giggling, and joking, excited by the unusual circumstances, but possibly also seeking to cover up their worries and personal embarrassment, provoked by their helplessness and need for assistance. We found the water in the house gradually receding but also becoming increasingly darker and dirtier, making it ever more unpleasant to walk through. We threw some disinfecting compounds into the flooded interior and returned to the hotel.

Return

On November 21, the first draining pump arrived at the housing estate; another followed a few days later. But the flood level, whose decline now everybody eagerly followed, went down only slowly, though the pumps drained the water 24 hours a day. By November 23, we found most of the interior of the house free of water, but full of rubbish from broken furniture and damaged belongings, and the floors slippery and covered by congested muck. I had never imagined that a relatively modest flood could leave behind so much dirt. But it should be remembered, that this was 'second-hand' floodwater, which had already flooded areas in the north of Bangkok before it reached our estate. In a rather cheerful mood, we devoted ourselves to the demanding work of draining the remaining flood water from the backyard, cleaning the floors, and drying the furniture, most of which turned out to be beyond repair. Despite our efforts, we eventually had to hire a professional cleaning team that brought the place into shape in a few hours. But the streets were still flooded and not passable by car, so we delayed our return until November 30, when we were finally able to drive through the receding waters and return home – a whole month after we had left. We went on a brief shopping spree, replacing the old, damaged, or broken furniture and equipment with new things, thus using the occasion of the disaster to partly renovate our house.

As our neighbours also started to come back and clean their properties, discarding damaged furniture and household goods, huge heaps of trash accumulated in front of the dwellings and in empty lots on the estate. The *saleng*, mobile collectors of recyclable rubbish, had a heyday raking through the trash. Buyers of second-hand goods crisscrossed the estate, seeking to purchase discarded furniture and equipment. The city brought in huge trucks to collect the junk. Community leaders called upon the households to send representatives to clean the *sois* of the accumulated dirt; but the communal spirit was gone: Except for my wife, virtually nobody responded to the call. Life in the estate had returned to normal.

Reflection

The 2011 floods have been likened to an 'interior tsunami', but it was a slow-motion tsunami, at least in its final stages, which left considerable scope for individual

agency. But its slowness also played an important role in my misapprehension of the situation and persistent denial of the threat to our neighbourhood. I was under the spell of a wrong image of a flood. Being familiar with flash floods, which come suddenly in the wake of a storm and recede quickly, I was completely unaware of the role of the complex man-made system of *khlongs* and drainage pipes through which the flood had advanced, in some instances spontaneously, in others manipulated by the authorities or even by the actions of angry inhabitants, who tried to open sluice gates or to destroy dykes, in order to release the water accumulated in their neighbourhoods ("Flood barriers," 2011; Rojanaphruk, 2011).

As a male and a foreigner I had certainly less access than my wife to the neighbourhood's informal information network, based mainly on the female members of households, and was less well informed about the threat of flooding than most locals. But it is important to note that, like the 2004 tsunami, the 2011 floods were unique in their enormity, and none of my neighbours had ever experienced anything similar. Hence, there was little reliable 'native knowledge' (of the kind the Moken sea-nomads allegedly possessed in the tsunami (Arunotai, 2008)) which could be of help to deal with the threat; but the havoc which the flood caused in the two provinces to the north of Bangkok, Nontaburi and Pathumthani, prior to reaching Bangkok, might have served as a warning to the locals, which I had disregarded.

Therefore, I failed to 'read' the developing situation correctly and was slow to react to it. Rather, I reluctantly went through a gradual process of transition from resident to 'exile' in a series of steps, each of which I initially resisted but then was eventually forced to accept:

1. From denial to acceptance of the possibility that our neighbourhood might be flooded.
2. From reluctance to acceptance of the need to put up sandbags.
3. From unwillingness to remove possessions to the higher floor to their reluctant removal.
4. From a conviction that we should remain at home, despite the flood, to the acceptance of its abandonment.
5. From a belief that we should stay away for just a brief time to the realisation that our 'exile' would be relatively long.

Having to leave one's home is generally a traumatic experience (Fried, 1963). Among Thai people, attachment to their home is strong; especially older people were reluctant to abandon their homes during the floods (Achakulwisut, 2011b). But in my case, the reluctance to do so was not so much motivated by a dread of homelessness as by an under-estimation of the actual threat as well as by a personal disposition to not exaggerate dangers and to remain cool in emergencies. This, in turn, is probably rooted in my early socialisation to the Israeli (military) ethos which stresses coolness as well as in some significant personal experiences. For – in contrast to most other people in our neighbourhood – abandoning or losing a home was not a new experience to me. During my childhood, in 1941, as Jews in fascist Croatia during the Second World War, we were thrown out of our flat on short notice; in 1949, I left my home in Zagreb, sadly but voluntarily, to emigrate to Israel; in 1964, when my first marriage broke up, I left my home precipitately. Each of these cases is different but together they constitute an experiential background which dwarfs the experience of the temporary abandonment of our house owing to the floods. Moreover, in the early 2000s I left my flat in Jerusalem to live in Thailand, though I still maintain it and stay in it during annual visits. The fact that, like many people in the contemporary mobile society (Haldrup, 2004), I had two homes, one in Jerusalem and another in Bangkok, might have attenuated my attachment to either. But I wonder what my reaction would have been if a disaster, such as an earthquake, hit my Jerusalem home, in which I have lived for almost 40 years.

Under the circumstances, the use of the epithet 'exile' for our leaving the house in the estate should be taken more as a playful, and – considering our comfortable conditions – ironic rather than serious description of our situation. In fact, the situation we found ourselves in after we left the house was ambiguous; we were neither 'at home' nor really 'away', staying in a hotel just a few minutes away from the estate and visiting it regularly. There is no appropriate term to designate our move from the house to the hotel: 'Flight', or even 'escape' seem inappropriate since we were not forced to leave by a physical threat; 'refuge' or 'exile' are terms too strong for a move of such a short distance from one's home; we were certainly not 'tourists' or 'vacationers' (like those Bangkokians who went to sea-side resorts could be described as), though we lived in a hotel and did engage in some touristic activities. In fact, we strove to continue our everyday life as much as the circumstances permitted, and we sought to stay as close to our home as possible. This indicates that, at least in our case, despite the

radical interruption of the basis of our ordinary existence by the disaster, there was no clear break between 'home' and 'away', or between 'everyday' and 'extraordinary' circumstances. This kind of intermediary situation seems to escape crisp conceptualisation since it comprises a modicum of continuity under conditions of change, provoked by a radical interruption of regular life by disaster.

I was also inclined to take our 'exile' easy, owing to a sense of inverted 'relative deprivation': People in other places, mainly outside Bangkok, were much more severely affected by the floods; in comparison, we got away lightly. I did not feel the anger and disappointment with the manner in which the authorities managed the flood like many Thai people. Unlike many Western expatriates, who criticised the authorities in angry letters to the editor of English-language newspapers, I felt that, as a foreigner living in Thailand, I had no standing to complain publicly, though I might study the event professionally.

Conclusion

In this account, written partly in 'real time', I related my experience of a localised event: the flooding of our neighbourhood. But that event was critically enmeshed in at least two principal contexts: the natural, topographical, and administrative context that fashioned the arrival, rise, perseverance, and termination of the flood in the neighbourhood; and my personal biography and previous experiences with floods (which, under the circumstances, were counterproductive), that channelled my perceptions and actions in a particular direction. My account thus draws attention to the complexities involved in the formation of a personal trajectory through a disaster. Thus, it contributes to the growing field of disaster studies by charting out the personal trajectory of the author through a prolonged flooding of his neighbourhood. It indicates that, although people might be exposed to similar threats and circumstances in a disaster, as they were in the flood in our estate, their trajectories through the event, in terms of perceptions, experiences, and actions, will be to a significant extent influenced and diversified by their particular biographies and previous key life experiences. Notwithstanding the similar spatio-temporal context of the event, peoples' varied reactions will thus result in a plethora of diverse personal trajectories. The foregrounding of the biographical dimension in human conduct in disasters is thus the specific contribution of this account to disaster studies.

1 PROTECTIVE WALL ON NEIGHBOUR'S GATE

2 SANDBAGS AT NEIGHBOUR'S GATE

3 MY WIFE WADDLING THROUGH THE STAGNANT FLOOD WATER

4 THE FRONT YARD OF OUR HOUSE UNDER WATER

5 BOATS ON MAIN STREET OF THE HOUSING ESTATE

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