"Why do you have to go so far away to do your fieldwork?” my father asked. “You should come with me on my walk in the mornings. You will see people lining up for water just downstairs.” My father was asking about my decision to learn how settlers access water in Jogeshwari, a northern suburb of Mumbai. He knew of my interest in studying how water systems were administered and claimed in the city. Yet he was puzzled by my decision to do ethnography “so far away.” His was a good question, and one that anthropology has long struggled to answer (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). I did not tell him that most anthropologists traveled far beyond the places where they grew up, and that a fifteen-mile journey in these terms was not far away. Nevertheless, my journey to “the field” across the city did involve a bit of a commute. I would get there by entreating a taxi driver to take me to the nearby train station, then boarding a standing-room-only compartment of the local train, and finally taking a shared auto-rickshaw to my field site. Like many, I would try my best to make this journey bearable by completing random tasks or sleeping along the way. Nevertheless, it would take an hour and a half in each direction. Why was I going so “far”? What was I going so far from? As a “native” and urban ethnographer, I asked myself what was at stake as I spatially marked my boundaries of home and the field.

There were several reasons to have picked the field site I did. The municipal government had identified the neighborhood as a pilot site for its first water privatization project. Coincidentally, based on my previous work in a human rights organization many years before, the neighborhood was also home to friends of mine who lived in the settlements that I wished to study. I could therefore “arrive” at my field site as a friend of friends, rather than as an employer of domestic workers (as would be the case in the settlements near my home), or as an NGO-affiliated researcher. But working away from home was also easier because the very same journey to the field afforded me a comfort that working in the settlements close to home would not allow. By going to Jogeshwari, I could overlook the very personal relations of privilege
and servitude—between myself and others who work in our home—that constitute my place as native and outsider in the cities of Mumbai. The journey also allowed me to get away from the various compulsions, duties, and responsibilities of home.

Layered and textured in an unpredictable manner, Mumbai’s cities confront you as soon as you step outside the affective safety of home. Its contrasts and contradictions do excellent work in disorienting its residents and their cognitive categories. Focusing on several urban locations—state offices, friends’ houses, squatter settlements, and NGO offices—I found myself emotionally drained as I tacked between Mumbai’s different places. When I moved to live in the settlements midway through fieldwork, the strain did not become easier to manage. I continued to cross the city to maintain relations that being a good friend, family member, and fieldworker required. At times, my activities were marked by stark contrasts—with some school friends, I would spend my monthly rent (in the settlements) over a single meal in a nice restaurant.

Crossing class boundaries quickly and repeatedly is likely a condition common to many large cities, particularly in the Global South where class structures visibly manifest in the proximate and dense accretion of shanties and luxury buildings that constitute the city. In comparison to wealthy residents who try and fail to insulate themselves from these contrasts, Mumbai’s serving class is compelled to make these crossings daily for their livelihood—to work in the city’s affluent homes and businesses, its shopping malls, luxury hotels, and restaurants. As my habit, language, and dress changed through these crossings, I wondered about what kinds of sensory and somatic rupture were required for this daily passage between home and work to be bearable. One settler told me of his work in the five-star Taj Mahal hotel as part of its housekeeping staff. “Sometimes, I get sent to turn off a tap in a guest’s bathroom that they forgot to turn off before leaving the room,” he told me, in a matter-of-fact voice, tinged with only the slightest trace of irony, as we waited by his tap for the water to come. What holds cities of inequality together? How is the cognitive dissonance of the journey across class in space inhabited? The city fragments its subjects, forcing them to suspend their comparisons and claims in the haste of just getting on and getting by.

As I developed friendships with my informants in the settlements, I found that they often approached these questions pragmatically, like my father. As we shared chai and our urban places (mine—art galleries, clubs, and restaurants; theirs—parks, street corners, beaches, and movie theaters), they were eager to make the most of our relationship across difference. Through our
unequal and limited engagement, we satiated some of our curiosities about the other—where we lived, what we ate, how we ate. Our mutually constituted stories had different meanings for us. I called mine research. They called theirs friendship. Truth be told, for all of us, it was a bit of both.

That the boundaries between research, friendship, and politics were blurry became apparent toward the end of the year, when both fieldwork and friendship were drawn into projects with political effects. Over time, Mr. Pandit, a senior state bureaucrat and family friend, was eager to help alleviate some of my informants’ difficulties. With the insights he gained from a “field trip” I took him on, he summoned municipal administrators and ordered they get things done in the settlements I was living and working in. Almost immediately, and just on the basis of this oral instruction, the machineries of the state temporarily moved to help provide some settlers with services they had been long entitled to but had only partly received.

The consequent visits of various state officers to the settlements to get things done elevated my social status in the field from friend to more powerful friend. I was soon inundated by requests—a food ration card had been unjustly denied, an application for a community center renovation lay gathering dust in the municipal ward office. Could I do something to solve the problem? A friend who worked in the city water department asked if I could instruct the department to give the settlement he lived in more water. As I made the field my home, its familiar obligations began to absorb much of my time.

Fieldwork has been frequently and justly criticized for the unequal relationship between the ethnographer and her all-too-often marginalized subjects. Nevertheless, such critiques overlook how research subjects often engage ethnographers in similar ways—as potentially useful friends. As ethnographers increasingly work across state and welfare organizations, both with powerful and subjugated groups, they mobilize both ethnographic authority and the social relations effected by fieldwork with powerful groups to help politically marginalized research subjects through personal and situated interventions. These messy, awkward collaborations are not necessarily the stuff of revolutionary theory, but they may be nonetheless significant.

Such practices of politics—of helping friends through personal, provisional, and improvisational introductions to “key” people—are a critical way in which people access state services in Mumbai today. The city is made through such unequal relationships between those who “help” others known to them—friends, employees, clients, siblings, and fictive kin. Such practices may not reduce the inequality that structures the city, but they do somehow

Fieldwork—63
manage to accommodate its extraordinarily diverse population against impossible odds. I had to “go” to the field to find that what made it home were its diverse and intensely personal-political obligations. They are the conditions of possibility for fieldwork, for social belonging, and also for urban citizenship.