It requires no special insight to see that these are difficult days — all the more so for anthropologists struggling to make our work relevant to the times. Even as our lives become more immediately dictated by military affairs and our social and political worlds more militarized, scholars in much of the world find themselves at arm’s length from actual military encounters. I would suggest that the promise of our discipline is not fully realized if we fail to bridge that divide. This is a time when, more than ever, we need frontline research.

What I mean by frontline research is scholarship that takes as its subject what occurs within zones of violent conflict. As a research interest, this is neither new nor unique. The anthropology of war has a long history. Over the last decade, anthropologists have increasingly tackled the methodological and philosophical concerns of fieldwork in unstable places — from Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ (1992) call for an ‘anthropology-with-one’s-feet-on-the-ground’ to Antonius Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom’s examination of ‘fieldwork under fire’ (1995). These are approaches to the discipline which become more relevant every day. What we must begin thinking about more critically, however, is how we deal with ‘the frontline’ as a research space, who is to conduct research in that space and how they are to be trained, and what kinds of knowledge might be produced. We need a more thorough ethnography of violence.

Academics at the front

Scholars are at last succeeding in expanding the conceptual boundaries of the frontline beyond the Clausewitzian definition of trained soldiers fighting in trenches — a critical redefinition with important perceptual and political possibilities. We now have a body of literature that looks at the militarization of civilian lives and of the economy (see Lutz 2001), and other types of social struggles as zones of conflict (see Foucault 2003, Virilio & Lotringer 1983). However, faced with the so-called ‘Bush doctrine’ of American-led wars of pre-emption in the Middle East, a covert war in Colombia and skirmishes in Israel/Palestine and Kashmir, we need to be certain that we do not neglect research done within combat zones and on the frontline as traditionally conceived.

The insights generated by a more expansive understanding of the ‘war-scape’ (Nordstrom 1997) also need to be focused on the combat zone itself. War’s implications for gender, the interface between combat and media technology, the reconfiguration of space and economy that comes through the militarization of insecurity, are made visible as we broaden our understanding of what constitutes war. Nevertheless, given the possibilities inherent in shifting approaches to the concept of culture — in particular a conception of the fragmentary nature of culture that can theoretically ‘handle’ the fragmenting experiences of war and violence — a growing ‘will to ethnographic truth about war’ (Lutz 1999: 612) needs to be met with a field praxis that includes the most immediate of war’s spaces.

There are risks inherent in research conducted in combat zones. But we have reached a point where those risks are necessary; as scholars and as a discipline we need to encourage and support individual researchers who are willing to take them. Increasingly the ability of journalists to report on and analyse what takes place at the frontline is compromised. Media conglomerates are not prepared to support journalists in long-term commitments to a single story, or to finance reporting from ‘out of the way’ places. When major operations are undertaken by the US or its European allies, those organizations are effectively censored by militaries which trade access for coverage (see...
Fig. 2. A member of the Kamajor militia with his weapon and the protective clothing used by the irregular fighting force. Bandajuma Sowa, Sierra Leone 2000. Ritual specialists prepare initiates in the organization for combat by making their bodies impervious to enemy fire.

As Jean Baudrillard (2002) has pointed out, for much of the world the military model of large manoeuvres of troops on a battlefield, as periodically staged by the US and its allies, is an anachronism. But for many of today’s conflicts the frontline is a more diffuse space, it nevertheless still exists. Thinking through how it exists is a theoretical challenge as yet largely unmet.

3. An anthropology of the media’s role in war – a true ethnography of journalism beyond the critiques of media common in cultural studies – would be a crucial contribution to the overall project of frontline anthropologists. See, for example, Pedelty 1995.

4. Nor, as Veena Das (2003) has argued, should such research lead to claims of a privileged moral position within the discipline.

5. This collaborative framework was one of the principal achievements of the unfortunately short-lived Social Science Research Council Global Security and Cooperation Program fellowships and research grants. As a model for how to propose and conduct frontline research unique in the current era of multi-sited fieldwork, however, the GSCP’s vision of a training period and of research attentive to the concerns of collaborative partners remains relevant.

6. As Akhil Gupta has illustrated, being ‘local’ does not automatically equate to an understanding of the micropolitics and power plays of a situation (Gupta 1995). This is especially true of the marginal figures who so often serve as anthropological informants.

As Jane Fialka (1992), a process taken to its logical extreme with the ‘embedding’ of reporters covering the war in Iraq. Budget cuts and a star system have resulted in much of the coverage of conflict being produced by a handful of designated ‘war correspondents’ whose knowledge of local contexts is limited and whose coverage is therefore formulaic. Those journalists who are prepared to go it alone and report on conflicts outside the media spotlight or the underreported aspects of war find fewer and fewer outlets for their work. The proliferation of television news channels and the internet has led to an explosion in the number of commentators, but ‘the news’ is now largely produced by official sources, pool reports or news services. The majority of news consumers continue to get their information from a handful of media conglomerates.

It falls on scholars now more than ever to find ways to speak as the critical voice from the wilderness. As Liisa Malkki has made clear, journalism and ethnography are not distinct forms of knowledge. Rather, once anthropologists take as suitable research objects the ‘fleeting, transitory phenomena’ (1997: 87) which are too often written out of ethnography and too often the exclusive concern of journalism, we are in a position to consider the extraordinary occurrence in the light of its context over time.

Anthropologists working in frontline zones are therefore in a crucial position to bear witness to the complex dynamics of that space, and to incorporate into that ‘witnessing’ a knowledge of cause and implication unavailable to a less integrated observer. While this may not mean an anthropologist or political scientist in every foxhole, we do need to be looking for ways to research spaces that have previously been officially or unofficially restricted, and to disseminate that scholarship in underutilized venues. The same market forces which have generated a more shallow understanding of world events on the part of practising journalists have led to a heavier reliance on the testimonies of ‘experts’ to contextualize and explain world events; given our long-term engagements with specific regions, peoples and issues, anthropologists are more qualified than most to fill that role and need to endeavour to do so.

As the trope of witnessing suggests, frontline anthropology poses both methodological and political questions. Perhaps more than in other research spaces, scholars working in combat zones cannot escape the reality that participation and observation – the two dimensions of cultural anthropology’s unique methodological contribution to the social sciences – are inseparable and are inherently political activities. Today’s conflict zones erase any vantage point of neutral, uninvolved observation. Presence requires participation. And if truth is indeed the first casualty of war, then the collection of narratives, the act of description and the process of analysis automatically raise issues of power and agency that demand that that participation is partisan. Frontline anthropology implies no preordained set of answers to questions about how one understands ‘participation’ or what kind of activism should arise from one’s partisanship. It does, however, demand that these be addressed.

The frontlines of the academy

An anthropology striving to fill the knowledge gap left by the retreat of journalism need not be any less academically rigorous or theoretically challenging. Frontline anthropology is still anthropology, and needs to maintain high disciplinary standards. Clearly, a focus on extraordinary events and highly mobile social actors suggests that the relevant model of ‘the field’ may not be that of a single, defined geographical space. But this hardly makes frontline research unique in the current era of multi-sited fieldwork, with the trend toward studies of global flows and networks. Like other such projects, its unconventional conceptualization of what constitutes ‘the field’ needs to be critically interrogated as part of the overall evaluation of the scholarship. And its geographical range should not come at the expense of its ethnographic depth. These are general concerns relevant to any project at the borders of disciplinary convention, and do not in themselves invalidate frontline research. Nor do I see much credibility in the argument that publishing or appearing in more popular media outlets must necessarily lead to ostracization from the academy. This might be of concern if a scholar’s intellectual output appears only in these forums. But for all the need to be more visible with our research, it is no less essential that the insights gained from frontline scholarship be applied to the
7. In my case, proposals for fieldwork in wartime Sierra Leone were awarded support by two of the programmes of the Social Science Research Council, the Wenner Gren Foundation, and various funding outlets at Duke University, suggesting that the funding sources normally associated with anthropological fieldwork are less averse to funding conflict zone projects than they might once have been.

8. The political designs and intentions of these institutions – and not simply the good intentions of the researcher – must of course be factored into decisions regarding potential research support. Orin Starn’s (1986) examination of anthropologists’ involvement with the US War Relocation Authority makes this point abundantly clear.


Fig. 4. A Bangladeshi peacekeeper and market women. Langhi, Sierra Leone 2001. Although the site of the largest deployment of UN peacekeepers in the world, the conflict in Sierra Leone receives relatively little media coverage compared to conflicts in Europe or the Middle East.

Fig. 5. The food ration queue at an NGO emergency clinic near Buedu, Sierra Leone, 2001. Not far from the Sierra Leone/Liberia border, refugee settlements in the region are vulnerable to the fighting on either side. Nevertheless, the presence of UN peacekeepers and NGO personnel facilitates some degree of access to the volatile location.

forefront of the academy as well. There is no reason why a frontline anthropology could not emerge from and be shaped by the theoretical and political projects of post-structuralism, feminism, queer theory and new Marxist paradigms. Indeed, it may be imperative that it do so.

This is not a type of research space in which every scholar would choose to work.6 But for those who do, we need to consider support through avenues and institutions that haven’t always been open to academics or with which the academy hasn’t always been on the best of terms. As an example, there are now a number of schools set up to train journalists and NGO workers to operate safely in combat zones (see, for example, Philp 2000). Making use of such institutions – and not just studying them – may well allow a motivated researcher to conduct field research in spaces from which academics have previously been excluded. There needs to be a concerted effort on the part of anthropologists to formulate collaborative projects with so-called ‘practitioner institutions’ (NGOs operating in conflict zones, indigenous or independent media outlets, policy institutions).7 At the same time, we need to be recruiting into graduate programmes people with backgrounds that enable frontline research. This would include journalists, but also NGO workers and military personnel.

In my own case, four years spent working as a photojournalist covering conflict zones in Africa and the Balkans before returning to graduate school proved to be an invaluable experience in two ways.

First, it meant that when going into an active war zone I possessed a certain set of skills that made me both more effective and safer as a researcher. My research is with a pro-government militia – the kamajors – involved in the war in Sierra Leone, and now in the ongoing fighting in Liberia. In the ethnographic tradition, this project has involved living with and interviewing members of the organization, principally young men. Much of this work was conducted in kamajor-dominated southeastern Sierra Leone and in the ruins of a Freetown hotel that served as a barracks. To a great degree, the sensibilities that proved most advantageous in this environment were the ones that should come naturally to anthropologists: listening carefully to, and taking seriously, the advice of informants with a better grasp than my own of the local context. Yet such local knowledge comes with no guarantees.8 Conducting interviews at a UN disarmament centre for irregular com-


Philp, R. 2000. Snatched from Voinjama, Liberia 2002. For refugee camps or the bush. Fighting combatants have fled the town contested for months by the UN. Children continue to serve in unmonitored locations in the region. UN, children continue to serve in unmonitored locations in the region. By agreements brokered by the internationally exclusive from military service in unmonitored locations in the region. The region.

Fig. 6. Child soldiers guarding forward positions, Voinjama, Liberia 2002. Although officially excluded from military service by agreements brokered by the UN, children continue to serve in unmonitored locations in the region.

confusion, and to understand the accounts we later gathered through the prism of our own experience of the event. Researchers are no less tied to institutions than are other potential witnesses. But I have found that a second benefit of prior experience of working in conflict zones was a certain credibility in my department and with funding agencies during initial efforts to garner support for my work. In conversations with individuals from both the university and funding bodies, it became clear that internal discussions turned on whether it was wise for the institution to promote research that posed a potential risk to the researcher. In each instance, making the case that I had the training and experience to do this work as safely as possible made the difference between acceptance and rejection of my proposed research.1 It goes without saying that the full measure of the quality of one’s scholarship is the merit of the work produced. Nevertheless, ethnographers must be prepared to trade on the capital accrued from a discipline which valorizes eyewitnessing as a research tool. With funders, with academic institutions, and with the audience one chooses to engage as an advocate or ‘expert’, there is a cachet in being able to demonstrate a safe and effective presence in a volatile research site.

Implicit here is an argument that for young scholars in particular, in addition to the important task of critiquing the university and funding institutions, there needs to be a more thoughtful and creative approach to making use of whatever avenues are available to conduct the engaged research we aspire to. As anthropologists, we are fortunate enough to be in a discipline that encourages field-based, participatory scholarship. Clearly, scholars in other disciplines are not always so lucky. Nevertheless, in the social sciences and humanities at this point a compelling case has been made for ethnographic research methods and the value of the perspective one gets from ‘being there’. Without discounting the critiques of anthropology and the privileged truth claims of ethnographic authority, there is a recognition that ethnographic fieldwork makes a distinct contribution to the human sciences. We must seize on that openness and begin to seek out funding sources and networks of support that might once have been sceptical of the methods required to do frontline fieldwork. The burgeoning field of security studies, the more traditional social sciences, non-academic and practitioner-oriented institutions offer previously unavailable opportunities for anthropologists to do frontline research.1 The trade-off is that we must be willing to acquire whatever training or experience is necessary to carry out the kind of research we want and need to do, and to convince the institutional structures through which we work that we are qualified to do so.

As Cynthia Mahmood (2002) has recently argued, ethnography (particularly in emotionally and physically challenging spaces) tends to produce unusually close bonds with research subjects. The intimacy of those bonds and the experience of bearing witness on the frontline affect every aspect of one’s scholarship, making the fal
dary of the divide between field methodology, theory and political engagement even more conspicuous. I have argued that frontline anthropology is a realization of the full potential of the discipline. Ironically, this realization is accomplished by exploring those spaces in which anthropology bleeds into journalism, activism, political science and other formerly distinct spheres of knowledge. This is not the end of anthropology. Rather, it is what makes anthropology relevant in the 21st century.