

The Revolution Was Not Televised:  
 Perspectives from the Banks of Beer Lake, 1969-1975\*

James D. Graham

The pond just south of Vandenberg Hall, spanned by a footbridge connecting our north-campus dormitories to the rest of Oakland University, was affectionately named Beer Lake by the residential students who enjoyed partying there (especially during summer months) before I first came to Oakland. From 1969-71, as husband of a new Head Resident of Hill House, father of a preteen daughter and the *in loco* parent for 200 resident coeds, as well as a teaching-oriented historian of Africa, I surveyed a good slice of campus life from our balcony window which overlooked Beer Lake. For several years thereafter, I remained directly connected with dormitory life through the teaching of experimental, interdisciplinary classes in Vandenberg Hall's New Charter College (where I taught beginning in 1971, and which I co-chaired from 1974-77). Oakland University was so much smaller then that groups of 10-12 students, supported by sympathetic faculty advisors, could be funded by the Student Activities Board and make their presence known on campus.

In the fall semester of 1969, Oakland's small chapter of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) led a well-attended sit-in at our Placement Office to protest the presence of on-campus military recruiters. The SDS dissolved (both locally and nationally) soon thereafter. The vast majority of O.U. students remained apolitical and culturally mainstream (except for those they called hippies, earth mothers or radicals). Some activist history majors, reflecting a current of the times (participatory democracy), pressured our department to open monthly faculty meetings to three student representatives. The resulting committee (called STUDFAC) gave those three students some voting powers in our departmental meetings, although this "power-sharing" arrangement lasted only a few months—as the students found our meetings so boring that they stopped attending. As long as the war in Vietnam continued—with compulsory draft registration for all 18-year old boys—teach-ins and classes about war, modern imperialism and Southeast Asia were popular. Never in my experience have I met so many young American

---

• This essay is excerpted (and edited) from a speech presented at the annual dinner of Oakland's chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (the History Honor Society), on February 7, 2004.

pacifists and conscientious objectors; busloads of Oakland students traveled to Washington D.C. during the fall of 1969 to demonstrate against the war.

While anti-war protesters, feminists, and a few Hispanic, gay rights and environmentalist pioneers held teach-ins, forums or meetings, the most politically active protesters in those years came from our growing body of African-American students. Oakland's first large-scale recruitment of black students (called Project Twenty) entered our classrooms and dormitories in the fall of 1969, when DeWitt Dykes and I started teaching here. The first African History class I taught then was (somewhat adventurously) called "African Socialism" (later to be renamed "Africa since 1900") which enrolled thirty-six students, several of whom were instrumental in establishing an umbrella organization for African-American students which they called the Black Liberation Caucus (BLC). BLC students astounded everyone soon after organizing themselves by filling up and then disrupting a large, required Gen. Ed. course on Western Literature. Dean George Matthews recognized the principle of their demand that black and female authors should be included among assigned readings in a required Western Lit. course. When the designated professor then teaching that course could not adjust, Dean Matthews assumed the professor's instructional duties and ultimately negotiated an agreement with the teaching faculty that they would henceforth include black and female authors on assigned reading lists.

In the spring of 1970 Oakland students and faculty publicly expressed their sadness and outrage over the killings of four white students by National Guard troops on the campus of Kent State University (Ohio). But subsequently, when two black students were killed by National Guard troops at Louisiana's Southern University, I found that I was one of only a few whites who gathered with our black students and their supporters to march toward the flagpole by Kresge Library, where we sang "Lift Every Voice" while lowering the main flag on campus to half-mast. Then, as we proceeded toward North Foundation Hall, some marchers looked behind us and saw a white student at the flagpole, pulling the flag up again to its full height. BLC students were so enraged that some immediately broke ranks and ran toward the white student; as I turned around, other faculty and administrators who were there called to me, "Go get him, Jim!" When I reached the flagpole a score of student marchers had surrounded the culprit, thrown him down and were kicking and cursing at him. Because they knew me, I was able to work my way into the center, pick up the frightened student and whisk him over to Dodge Hall, call Public Safety and help to defuse that particularly volatile focus of racial tensions.

As dorm windows opened up during the spring and summer terms of 1970, Beer Lake resounded with the militant new lyrics of a pioneering percussion-rap group called The Last Poets. The drumbeats and verses from their first LP (labeled "For

Mature Audiences Only”) blasted from dorm stereos across Beer Lake all summer long—without regard for tender ears or delicate sensibilities. All of us who lived there, willy-nilly, picked up the first phrases of “When the Revolution Comes”...

When the revolution comes, some of us will probably catch it on TV, with chicken hanging from our mouths. You’ll know it’s the revolution, because there won’t be no commercials....when the revolution comes.

Other verses were more explicit and confrontational, assaulting the unfamiliar ear with words and rhythms which exuded militancy and rebellion.

Throughout that summer and beyond, BLC leaders and at least two different groups of white student activists discussed what “the revolution” meant to them. One of the latter groups, actively supported by dormitory staff, founded an organization called OPAR (Oakland People Against Racism), who took it upon themselves to meet with small groups of their peers (other white students) in dorm lounges and, later, in Freshman Orientation Groups—where they sought to recognize racist slurs and behaviors and to distinguish between individual and institutional racism. OPAR and most other students honored picket lines during the first faculty strike (1971), convinced as they were that a key student interest in that strike was the faculty demand to limit class size (by establishing a 20:1 faculty-student ratio). Later, after BLC students occupied the Vandenberg cafeteria to press home their demands for more recruitment of and better support services for minorities, some OPAR enthusiasts sought to “support” the BLC by forcing everyone out of South Foundation Hall and chaining/padlocking the doors shut. Roy Kotynek and I rushed over there to dissuade them from undertaking such a meaningless action, especially since BLC leaders had told us that they did *not* want such “support.” For interfering with this student action, Roy and I were each read out of “the revolution” by more militant faculty colleagues who accused us of being “counter-revolutionary.”

Meanwhile, Roy was also meeting informally with an assortment of student musicians, writers, and artists who lived in downtown Rochester, where he critiqued their writing and artwork and engaged them in ongoing conversations about the cultural implications of “the revolution.” Some of these students regularly performed in a proto-rock/jazz/funk band called “White Trash”; others were elected to the Student Activities Board, where they obtained funds to organize an independent film series on campus featuring full-length movies by such leftist directors as Jean Luc Godard, Luis Bunuel and Gillo Pontecorvo. Some of these artistic and (essentially) anarchistic students also put together and distributed a popular alternative student newspaper, published bi-weekly as *Warp*; their essays, cartoons and exposes in *Warp* were sharply critical of O.U.’s

corporate leadership. *Warp* editors later worked with some BLC artists and writers to publish a second alternative newspaper called *BLC Speaks*. BLC representatives on the Student Activities Board also secured enough money to sponsor a memorable public lecture by Huey Newton (a co-founder of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California) who had just been released after some years in jail. He spoke to an overflow audience at Oakland's Lepley Arena, on an occasion in which some of our BLC students joined with Black Panther Party members from Pontiac (where the BPP had started a school breakfast program) to implement a complete body search of every person who entered, to refuse re-admission to anyone who left the arena (even for a pit-stop) and to maintain order among the huge crowd during Mr. Newton's rambling five-hour talk about Fanonism, the lumpenproletariat and "the revolution."

Between 1972-74, with a new generation of Oakland students, the BLC morphed into a broader, more inclusive student organization called the Association for Black Students (ABS), while the OPAR, White Trash and *Warp* activists also graduated and moved on. New Charter College continued to attract more creative, off-beat, activist students although, after the Vietnam War ended, this new generation didn't tend to organize much around overtly political issues. There continued to be tension on campus (as at other universities) around affirmative action policies and cultural/lifestyle differences between black and white students. The most experimental interdisciplinary course I taught at that time in New Charter College (NCC) was called "Black, White, Male, Female." Our class barely avoided ending that semester in physical mayhem when all four of our sub-groups (WM, BM, BF, WF) came together to speak frankly and openly about their opinions and needs! Even then, the most inflamed rhetoric was more personal, racial and gender-oriented than revolutionary.

During the summer of 1974 (while working at the NCC Office in Vandenberg Hall), I experienced a startling *déjà vu*, as sounds of Gil Scott-Heron's popular song—"The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"—wafted across Beer Lake in and through our open windows. This record (featuring Ron Carter on bass, Hubert Laws on flute and Brian Jackson on piano) was subtle jazz rather than in-your-face proto-rap, while the lyrics were more reflective and satirical than profane and revolutionary:

The revolution will not be televised. You will not be able to stay at home, brother [not the N-word!]. You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out.

You will not be able to lose yourself on skag and skip out during commercials...

because the revolution will not be televised.

It was during 1974-75, aided by twelve trained student assistants, that I learned why “the revolution” would not be televised. As Coordinator of the largest New Charter College course, a forum on “Survival in Metropolitan Detroit,” I met with a hundred and twenty-five students one evening each week in a large dining room at the O.C. Our students gathered around twelve tables to discuss weekly readings relating to such topics as racism and sexism, prisons and the criminal justice system, behavior modification, community cooperatives, counseling centers, family shelters and hotlines. Every week we heard and questioned such prominent local leaders as (now) Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson, U.S. Congressman John Conyers, Detroit City Council member Sheila Cockrell, Judges Justin Ravitz (Detroit) and Christopher Brown (Pontiac) and Detroit activist authors James and Grace Lee Boggs. We were often joined by other interested folks, both from O.U. and local communities. At that time, even in that context, students seldom spoke of “the revolution.” All my student assistants reported that their tables were much more interested in practical issues about how to proceed, to solve social problems and to work toward gradual, incremental improvements than to talk about “the revolution”—whatever that meant to different people.

That’s when I realized that “the revolution,” indeed, would *not* be televised, because “the revolution”—a complete overturning of the power structure, as defined by various Marxists, anti-imperialists, Fanonists, black power advocates, radical feminists and others—was *not* happening. Incremental change, bolstered by the Voting and Civil Rights Acts and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, was indeed proceeding, and continues to ameliorate some inherited inequities in American life (though racial and gender gaps still exist). By the mid-1970s, Oakland students (like Americans in general) were beginning to focus more intensely on how to adapt to the genuinely revolutionary changes being introduced by computers, in what Alvin Toffler characterized as the “Technocratic Revolution.” He predicted that cybernetic technologies would have as profound an impact on human modes of production and lifestyles as the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions of earlier eras. During the past quarter-century, computers, satellites and cell-phones have indeed begun to revolutionize the pace and range, workloads and communication modes of our daily lives. While I remain skeptical whether current problems like worms, viruses, spam, cookies, identity theft, security, copyrighting, misinformation, costs, internet accessibility and the digital divide can ultimately be overcome, I also remain fascinated by the *historical process*—the quickening pace of incremental changes which all contribute, in aggregate, to a third fundamental revolution in human existence which has now begun, during our lifetimes.