

An Open Letter to Seneca Turner

May 21, 2010

From: Floyd W. Hayes, III

Re: The New Way: Blackness in the Age of the *Terminator*—Beyond Resistance and Salvation

Dear Brother Seneca,

As a kid in the 1940s, I used to watch Buster Crabbe play Flash Gordon in the science fiction serials on TV, and I was fascinated by the futuristic portrayal of spaceships and winged villains. Noticing how captivated I was, my father would tell me repeatedly that there would come a time when science fiction would become scientific reality. Even as my dad announced the coming age, we already were living in a new techno-scientific historical moment of nuclear/atomic development that was enunciated when the United States attacked Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

I want to use this perspective (i.e., futuristic, techno-scientific development) in response to your most recent open letter (spring 2010). For decades, some scholars have argued that we live in what they characterize as the managerial age of advanced knowledge, science, and technology, in which managerial elites and their knowledge organizations increasingly manage people and wield power based upon expert knowledge. But this is a characterization of new politics and policymaking dynamics. Underlying this development is a complex techno-knowledge revolution that is chiefly seen in the explosion of computers and other electronic advancements.

However, what has received less attention is the biotechnological revolution that may very well transform what it means to be human. I use the science fiction *Terminator* series as a metaphor for this development (for discussions of the *Terminator* series, see Richard Brown and Kevin Decker, eds., *Terminator and Philosophy*), for it can serve as a guide in the interrogation of what it may mean to be Black in the new age of advanced knowledge, science, and technology. An early step in this transition is the Black woman, who was the world's first human to be fitted with a commercially available bionic hand last year (see "Bionic Hand 'Has Changed Everything,'" *Jet Magazine*, May 4, 2009, 20-21). Regardless of the ethical issues involved, it appears that we cannot be far from other forms of biotechnological developments—e.g., artificial intelligence, robotics, cloning, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, androids, and cyborgs—that may change what it means to be human (see James Hughes, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future*). Within the next two or three decades, and whether or not Blacks like it, the distinction between human and machine may become increasingly blurred. As Rodney Brooks, M.I.T. professor of computer science and engineering and director of the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, claims: "Our machines will become much more like us, and we will become much more like our machines" (*Flesh and Machine: How Robots Will Change Us*, 11). What is the significance of the growing discourse of trans-human or post-human futures (see Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*), and what are the possible consequences for Black people? How do we think about Black Nationalism in the Age of the *Terminator*?

In your correspondence, which is dedicated to the memory of Brother William C. Griffin (1935-2010), you issue a thought-provoking challenge to us to think through the crisis of Black Nationalism in a changing global situation. You mention seeing an interview of Ossie Davis, Gordon Parks, and Melvin Van Peebles entitled “Unstoppable, a Conversation with Ossie Davis, Gordon Parks, and Melvin Van Peebles,” in which Davis stated that Blacks needed to develop a new way of existence in the future. You then ask, “What is that ‘new way?’” What does it mean to engage issues of this type? Do we engage in the kind of discourse about the “New Negro” that Alain Locke and others did during the Harlem Renaissance? Significantly, were they actually “new negroes?” Or were they faking an illusionary identity and existence, as Richard Wright and Harold Cruse argued? Therefore, we must be careful when speaking of constructing a new way to be Black. Hence, my initial question: is there a new way of being Black in the twenty-first century? And then I ask: what is this new way? Indeed, what is this new way in the Age of the *Terminator*?

When trying to analyze our situation, Black folks often, too often, stand in the present and look back to the past. We live the past in the present. However, what I want to suggest is that we stand in the present, reflect on the past, so that we can look to the future. That is to say, we might benefit from paying attention to trends, developments, and future challenges related to the subject of our discussion. We also need to engage contradictions, dilemmas, and alternatives that follow. In other words, we need to deal with new ideas, concepts, theories, even new thinking about thinking itself (see Joshua C. Ramo, *The Age of the Unthinkable: Why the New World Disorder Constantly Surprises Us and What We Can Do About It*). We need to focus on the future; all of us must become futurists!

It is the Black existential situation—of enslavement, Jim Crow segregation, lynching, and anti-Black racism—that historically has shaped the condition of being Black in the United States of America. And it has been an historical situation characterized by disaster, atrocity, and evil that has been the source of Black anger, outrage, resentment, and struggle. Yet, in the contemporary period of expanding right-wing conservatism, along with the real possibility of neo-fascism (see Chris Hedges, *American Fascists*; Allan Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation*; Ronald Walters, *White Nationalism, Black Interests*), younger generations of Blacks seem to have lost the will to struggle against the forces of White supremacy and anti-Black racism. Hip hop culture, the most recent form of Black expressive culture, seems to be aware of the vicious nature of postmodern racist and capitalist culture, but appears to be indifferent to radical or progressive political struggle (see Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*; Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*; Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*). So far, hip hop cultural adherents—they do not appear to be warriors—do not look like the progenitors of a new way of being Black in the twenty-first century.

But there is a larger set of issues with which Black people will have to contend. What if the United States of America is in decline? In *Dark Ages America*, Morris Berman argues that the question is not *if* the American Empire will fall, but *when*. For some years, America has launched itself onto a path of self-destruction, punctuated particularly by the former Bush regime’s so-called wars on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan (see Anonymous, *Imperial Hubris*; Walden Bello, *Dilemmas of Domination*; Carl Boggs, *Imperial Delusions*; Lewis Lapham, *Pretensions of Empire*; Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome?*). These wars, along with increasing hostilities with Iran and Pakistan, show every possibility of deepening, especially with the ever expanding deployment of the robotics of war (see P. W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*). The United States defends its aggression using the

cover of promoting a democracy that actually has never existed in America! Yet, mounting American militarism and imperialism contain their own contradictions and dilemmas, clearly evident in the breakdown *within* U.S. military forces overseas—e.g., fatigue, suicide, rape, murder, psychotic disorders, and much more. Off and on for some time, I have been reading Edward Gibbon’s study, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, trying to discover if the Romans were conscious of their empire’s degeneration and decline. This is because I, like so many other Americans, sense that the U.S. Empire is crumbling. A post-American world is emerging as China and India are becoming bigger actors on the global, political, and economic scene (see Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*).

Nowhere is America’s deterioration more evident than in the field of education (see Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, *The Race between Education and Technology*). In the years to come, the United States may find it increasingly difficult to compete with educationally advanced nations, as international universities gain more prominence on the world scene (see Ben Wildavsky, *The Great Brain Race*). With quality education in decline, such crises as programmed retardation, functional illiteracy, “cultural wars” ignited by right-wing conservatives, the resurgence of intellectual bankruptcy, and athletes as the new gladiators and cultural heroes are becoming the order of the day. In a world that is becoming increasingly knowledge dependent, America’s glaring educational degeneration indicates a major turning point in the Empire.

At Johns Hopkins University, where I teach courses in Africana Studies and political science, too many students fail to read sufficiently; too many scarcely exhibit any intellectual curiosity; and too many write so poorly that I wonder how they were admitted. Significantly, many Black students view me as an “old school” professor because I still demand considerable reading, serious class discussion, and quality scholarship. Importantly, my class lectures are filled with examples and analyses of the Black Power struggle of the late 1960s and 1970s. Disappointed, I am thinking about retiring in the next few years.

In the future, what will become of young and not so young Black men? In Baltimore, 76 percent of Black males do not complete high school! Black females do not come close to this figure. I suspect that the numbers are similar in other big cities. This percentage of high school drop/push-outs would be calamitous under any circumstance. In a knowledge-intensive society in the Age of the *Terminator*, this educational reality is beyond catastrophic! Young, Black men will not have a chance at life without a quality education. They face now and will continue to face lives of violence, trauma, prison, or death (see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*; John Rich, *Wrong Place, Wrong Time: Trauma and Violence in the Lives of Young Black Men*). What troubles me even more is that so many criminologists of the future will more than likely be Black. In recent years, I have been astounded by the growing numbers of Black undergraduate and graduate sociology majors who, looking for employment immediately upon graduation, are studying to become criminologists. Significantly, they may be the future professionals who will use their expertise to define young, Black men (and women) as criminal. Moreover, they may very well be aided by various biotechnological means. Here, I am reminded of the movie *Minority Report*, in which Tom Cruise starred as a criminologist who was aided by a technological apparatus that could define a person as criminal before the person actually committed a crime. Of course, the contradiction was that Cruise became the target of the same technology. Is this the fate of uneducated, young, Black males in the new age of advanced knowledge, science, and technology? Will they be the victims of an expanding prison-technological complex?

Against such a background, how can we answer Ossie Davis's penetrating question? Will there be, can there be, a new way of being Black in the twenty-first century? What will it mean to be a Black human in the Age of the *Terminator*? As of yet, we cannot know for certain. What we know is that the future is in the present and that we live in a moment that is becoming more and more complex and uncertain. With mounting social complexity, we might suspect the disappearance of a singular Black community or people. Black Nationalists of all stripes seem to take for granted a singular Black collectivity. Even though I know differently, I always speak of Black people as if there is a unified, but not necessarily uniform, Black people or "nation." Perhaps Blacks never have been a singular people or community with one aim, one destiny, as Marcus Garvey claimed. The more we study the slave trade and chattel slavery, the more we learn that captured African slaves came from various West African nations from Morocco to the Old Congo Kingdom. Forced to become a single people in North America as a result of the slave experience, numerous captured African nationalities had to forge a common identity as Black Americans. Yet, there always were differences in social outlook among captured African slaves and their American descendants because of the complicated relationship between slave owners and slaves, between the exploiters and the exploited, between the oppressors and the oppressed. Moreover, house slaves and field slaves experienced different existential situations, which often produced competing worldviews. Being Black, then, always has been a complicated and complex existential experience. This reality continues to be true today and may very well remain so in the decades to come. (The complexity continues to expand as our continental African cousins are relocating to the United States in massive numbers each year.) Moreover, living as a slave or during the old Jim Crow South meant living with a great amount of uncertainty. It was difficult to know when one would live or die. Living with such uncertainty gave rise to an improvisational style of living; one had to learn to expect the unexpected. This kind of improvisational lifestyle—a means of existing that faced complexity and uncertainty head on—has allowed Blacks to survive. But will this be sufficient in the Age of the *Terminator*?

We now are left to speculate about Blackness in the twenty-first century of advanced knowledge, science, and technology. How will the process of human-machine integration be accomplished? Are humans already techno-sapiens sapiens? How will resultant conflicts be handled? What role and significance will ethics play in the politics of biotechnological development? We cannot say that only Whites will make future biotechnological decisions. Black scientists, engineers, and ethicists also will be involved. Within less than twenty years, the world will be well onto the path of post-humanism or trans-humanism. For example, biomedical engineers have created the defibrillator—a biotechnological enhancement that is inserted in the body to manage heartbeats. Another example is the Bluetooth, which is worn on the outer ear; it augments the cell phone. Will that technology eventually be implanted somewhere in the human body? Have you noticed how relatively easy it is to change one's sexual identity through new surgical procedures? What about the issue of artificial intelligence and the enhancement of the human brain and its powers of reasoning (see the books by Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of the Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* and *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*)? How will the biotechnological revolution transform human "nature?" How will humans interact with robots that have been programmed with artificial intelligence? How will biogenetic engineering or manipulation affect human or post-human decision making? Will we still be able to talk about "autonomous" judgment and decision-making? In the face of mass-mediated management (e.g., commercialization of choice), can we

be said to make independent political and economic choices today? Also, how will the robotics of war affect human soldiers who may no longer be fighting on the ground but in a computer laboratory? Can/will human irrationality be inserted into the artificial intelligence of machines?

Seneca, many years ago, you said to me that there always were benefits and burdens with respect to legal decisions. I never have forgotten that insight. Although I am uncomfortable about future challenges associated with the biotechnological revolution, I am reminded of your perspective and now apply it to issues regarding the burdens and benefits of new biotechnological decisions and developments. Surely, there must be benefits associated with human biological and mental enhancements in the post-human or trans-human world. Yet, the possible burdens of increased uncertainty, complexity, unpredictability, and conflict, which the *Terminator* series makes quite plain, are obvious. How will racism or capitalism interact with the biotechnological revolution? Who will be making crucial decisions? How will technologically-enhanced decision making affect the world? Will the gap between humans and machines become increasingly blurred, and what will be the significance of this development? Is the world as we know it coming to an end as the fundamentalist, religious adherents call the predetermined apocalypse (see Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End of Times*)? Or is the future still in the hands of humans or post-humans? Perhaps it is in some kind of post-human or trans-human future that a new way of being Black and humanist may have to be forged—beyond resistance and salvation. Whatever the future holds, guiding principles of analysis and living will include the ability to deal with social complexity, uncertainty, unpredictability, and conflict in the future world disorder.

Sincerely,

Floyd

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