As interposed opaque bodies, black females partially emerge from double-paned obscurity because of their “reflection” of others—generally whites or black males. Even in space devoid of light, mainstream Americans see the distorted figure of the “mammy” who in combative stance transforms into her stereotypical antithesis, the “sapphire.” Projecting either inferiority, maternal domesticity, or animalistic hostility, American culture inscribes upon black females their appearance as shadows . . . These projections haunt the public and private lives of black females.

—Joy James, Shadowboxing: Representation of Black Feminist Politics

The title of this afterword—“You . . . You Remind Me of . . .”—refers to all the times that I have been told that I “remind” someone, usually a white person, of Whoopi Goldberg. These occasions range from “friendly” conversations at a grocery store (always started by the other) where the person (usually white) simply “must” mention that, “by the way, you really look like . . .” to loud comments at the mall, “Hey, there goes Whoopi Goldberg.” Perhaps the most disturbing occurrences were those times when my body felt as though it was no longer my own. White people (strangers) have touched me and told
me that I look like Whoopi Goldberg, as if in touching me they were touching her and as if I no longer looked like but rather was her—in cases like this my being is not only disrupted but also put in jeopardy. To illustrate this point, a crazed white “frat” boy once grabbed and shook me, while screaming, “Whoopi, Whoopi, Whoopi!” into my face. After his assault ended, he pushed me aside and walked off laughing with his friends. He has probably never thought of that moment again, but I have relived it several times. It was as if in shaking me he was trying to physically dislodge Lupe and substitute his version of Whoopi in her place. I have even been called Whoopi in my professional life, when, during a lecture in class, a white male student observed, “You know, you really look like Whoopi Goldberg.”

These recurrent experiences have led me to wonder about what they really mean and why they continue to happen, not just to me but to many others as well. When white people say that I remind them of Whoopi Goldberg, what is it that they think they know about me? Is it really the perception of a physical similarity or not? And how does their claim to know me affect their encounter with me, and more broadly, how does it affect their encounter with black women as a whole? Is it an attempt to reach out and build a relationship or to disrupt power relations and close off a relationship? Is it an expression of admiration or an attempt to reduce me to the level of the comedic? Since these repeated experiences, which, again, I do not believe to be unique to me, have surprised, perplexed, and frustrated me for many years, here I want to examine them more deeply and understand what role they serve in the white imagination.

A number of black male scholars, such as Frantz Fanon, Charles Johnson, and George Yancy, have theorized the white gaze and its impact on the black male body in a way that combines the personal and the theoretical. In their work, they draw from their own experiences to show how their own embodiment as black and as male is affected by the white gaze. From these experiences, they go on to show how, in spite of who they are or what they do, the white gaze ensnares them. Johnson, in “A Phenomenology of the Black Body” for instance, focuses on the change that occurs when he enters a bar filled with white customers. While he may have entered the bar pondering intellectual problems in logic, the customers’ gazes return him to his embodiment and the characteristics associated with it in the white imagination, such as violence, virility, savagery, etc. In a similar vein, Yancy has described what he terms the “elevator effect.” This refers to his entrance onto an