for people speaking from the margins, because it represents intersectional identities and interconnected histories. Black speak does a similar duet, borrowing from and distinguishing itself from intercultural influences and playing off the poetics of language to perform itself narratively.

Similarly, in what Alice Walker (1983) refers to as “double vision,” or the ability to “see [your] own world and its close community while intimately knowing and understanding the people who make up the larger world that surrounds and suppresses [your] own” (p. 19), I use autoethnography to see myself twice, talking back to myself and others at the same time. Autoethnography is particularly helpful because it is a doubled storytelling form and moves from self to culture and back again. In the black community, this strategy and dual awareness have also been referred to as “call and response” (Sale, 1992), “shifting” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), and “double consciousness” (DuBois, 1918); it is the ability of black folks to see themselves through the eyes of others while being fully aware of themselves. This duality helps me speak from the periphery.

As a black woman who was raised in the south in a working class and matrifocal family, sayin’s were meaningful lessons in my childhood that served as both reminders and warnings. It was through sayin’s that I learned the politics of my existence and the agency of my voice. I learned ways of resisting discriminatory labels by having myriad ways to talk, tell stories, and make myself visible.

In the following pages, I examine seven sayin’s that signal the storied contexts in which I learned them. Sayin’s are simultaneously a practice of storytelling and a performative accomplishment of embodiment that includes inflections and gestures that are discernible within and outside black communities. Sayin’s theorize both in vernacular and in relationship to race/culture/class/southern regions. Through the
use of sayin’s and memories, black folk invoke a social, dramaturgical (Goffman, 1956) approach to storytelling that is performative, situational, and audience-oriented. Embedded in sayin’s are lived experiences, messages, warnings, affirmations, traditions, and cultural influences. Therefore, I attempt here to express how cultural sayin’s reflect the homogeneity of black culture while also expressing the singularity of my personal experience. While the particular sayin’s I focus on are woman-centered and situated within the context of rurality, they could easily translate across social identities and geographies.

I also speculate about the ways autoethnographic method allows stories to speak for themselves and how sayin’s are cultural performances of autoethnography. Sayin’s, in this context, are intended to mark the ways our memories and cultural inheritances (re)emerge in our work and serve as catalysts of behavior.

Sayin’s reflect and reinforce how U.S. American and African American cultures shaped my identity and feminist politics (my relenting to and resistance of them). The side effects of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism affected the ways in which I was taught to be a (strong) black woman in the South, but they also inform(ed) my scholarship. These stories reflect how I was conditioned to see myself as a poor, black girl in my southern, quasi-conservative rural community. The sayin’s reflect themes of gendered bodily decorum, the politics of beauty, legislative sexuality and reproduction, class and its treasures, performative resistance, and aims for dignity.

**SAYIN’ #1: “SIT WITH YOUR LEGS CLOSED!”**

I suppose she is selective with her words because she holds on to them like a secret she promised to never tell. Her voice is bigger than her body: massive, impossible, beautiful and terrible, and it falls from her mouth like thunder falls from fair weather cumulus clouds, out of nowhere.

I am sitting, wide legged, on the porch, legs dangling, listening, not for her voice, but for cars passing. I am distracted by the cars, the rocks, the trees, the flies, the wishes, the practicing. My delayed response inspires her anger.

“You hear me talking to you?”

I turn around and meet her focused eyes. I want to say, “Yes, ma’am,” but don’t. We only say ma’am when we are in trouble or in public. It is not required at home or when there is no company to witness it. I swallow fear and resist the urge to respond, knowing she does not require my words, only my obedience.

“Sit up and close your damn legs. This ain’t no peep show!” Her tone and her eyes let me know she means business.

She looks mad. Three vertical lines appear on her forehead, waiting for me to mind. I jump up, pushing my knees tightly together, sorry for not remembering I was not a boy, sorry for acting like I wasn’t raised right, like I wasn’t taught any better. Good girls don’t sit gap legged. Sitting wrong gives the wrong impression. I don’t want to be the kind of girl who sits with her legs wide open, grown, fast, hot in the ass. My legs are now together, touching. My obedience pleases her and she returns to the house without speaking.

I will consistently remember, in her presence and in public, to sit with my ankles touching.

**SAYIN’ #2: “BEAUTY IS PAIN!”**

According to an old wives’ tale, if you want your hair to grow, you should only cut it with the growing of the moon. I didn’t always understand the rules, but I damn sure tried to follow them. The only thing I wanted more than being light skinned, as a child, was for my hair to grow long like Rapunzel, or at least as long as my sister’s, which reached past her shoulders and down her back. My mother never paid me any mind when I insisted that, according to Seventeen magazine, I was supposed to brush my hair one hundred times...
every night for it to be healthy. Her response to that, and most things I announced from the $2-a-month subscription, was that I was “not white.” White girl rituals (like brushing your hair one hundred times every night and washing your hair every day) made my blackgirl hair fall out. When I treated my hair like it was white, it became too dry and broke off at split ends from being brushed too long. My fragile, thin, well-brushed hair came out in the teeth of the comb in clumps, leaving the edges of my hairline bald. Having a ponytail that touched my back seemed impossible but was my life’s aspiration. My natural hair, even after being straightened with the hot comb, would always stubbornly concede to sweat, water, humidity, or time and shrink back to its original state, closer to my ears than my shoulders. I wanted a more permanent solution and begged my mother to let me have a perm, like her and my sister, but she refused, saying I already thought I was “grown.” She said she wouldn’t be able to “do nothing with me” if my hair was long enough to touch my shoulders. Chemically straightened hair was for grown women (and white girls). She decided I was too young to get a perm and had no business wanting one. She told me it burned worse than the hot comb, which ritualistically would give me the same general effect, only short-lived. I promised that I didn’t mind the pain. Hair I could feel on my skin without my hands would be worth the scabs on my scalp, and cocoa butter on my forehead.

**hair story**

hot torture
hot hands
close to scalp
hot comb
hot air
pushing against nape of neck
Mama’s hands
gentle, strong, unrelenting
combing through yesterday’s kinks
making them straight
hot
burning
smoking
smelling like
singed and melting
hair
hands on chin
elbows on knees
but Mama is pleased
at the outcome
coming along

and yielding an inch
of new growth
from last time
our hour-long ritual
every few months
when my hair is dirty enough to wash
curly wet
nappy dry
coming together like arms hugging
Mama complains
my hair is just like hers
unruly
hard to comb
not like her Mama’s
side
this hot comb is our salvation
transforming texture
from tight around my scalp before
to touching my shoulders after
hot comb magic
making my hair
white girl like
hot torture
sitting between Mama’s legs
trying not to cry
and sitting still
worrying there won’t be
enough cocoa butter
to cover the scars
holding ears with loose hands
eyes closed
metal combs
resting on the hot eye of the stove
taking turns
bringing tears to my brown-black eyes
an embrace like love
legs tightened around my body
“Beest your head still girl,”
Mama says
careful to not keep it too hot
or let it get too cool
blowing the comb ‘til smoke rises
and inhaling the fumes like cigarette smoke
she is in the kitchen
pulling out my kitchen
tight waves
too stubborn to move
and falling out
on some days
Sundays
is when hair must
lay down
and behave
tamed
under bows
and blue pomade
and fancy braids
made with three strands
wrapped around each other
pulled between Mama’s greased fingers
cressing my scalp
and wrapping around until my hair is connected like
rope
falling
finally
past my ears
near my shoulders
and I smile
knowing
beauty is pain
but loooooooooooooooooooong hair
is everything

**SAYIN’ #3: “IF SOMEBODY HITS YOU, HIT ‘EM BACK—HARDER!”**

All of the grandchildren got the same “talking to” when it was time to start public school. Entering a space where we would not have the protection of grown kinfolk, my grandmother expected us to learn early. I was not even five years old when I stood between my grandmother’s knees and listened to her tell me what to do if somebody hit me at school.

“If somebody hits you, you better hit ‘em back—harder!” She emphasized the last word by hitting her own hand with her fist, showing me how to ball my fingers up like hers. “Don’t let me hear tell of you letting somebody put their hands on you and you don’t hit ‘em back. And if you let somebody whoop your ass at school, look for another ass whooping when you get home.”

I knew she meant it. She expected me to defend myself against attackers, but also to protect myself in the world, because as a black girl, I would get pushed around. She didn’t intend for me to get used to it, she intended for me to learn how to fight back.

No one ever talked about how this advice contradicted what we were taught in Sunday school, to “turn the other cheek” when someone strikes you. The biblical teaching and the colloquial practice were incongruous, but my grandmother found it illogical and backwards to not teach her children to fend for themselves. “If God gives you strength,” she would say, “you knock the hell out of ‘em!”

I listened to her give this same lecture to every other child on the verge of entering school. And they nodded, practiced the fist, and promised to follow her instructions, just like I did. Hoping, though, it would never come to that, while fearing it inevitably would.

**SAYIN’ #4: “YOU’RE PRETTY TO BE A DARK-SKINNED GIRL”**

My privacy wasn’t a secret place to escape in order to forget my problems or hide. When I was a child, my privacy was the upside-down triangle below my navel, the slight curve on my otherwise flat chest, the soon-to-be-blackgirl butt that arched when I bent over, begging for maturity. When I was growing up privacy was one thing, but it was no secret that being dark-skinned was not preferable or privileged. On the playground, children would chant, “If you white, you all right, if you brown, get down, if you black get back!” I was black.

I didn’t fully understand why race and complexion mattered, but it was clear that it did, inside and outside our homes. We understood the dynamics of colorism, even though we didn’t have the language, because our conversations were not that sophisticated. Similarly, we didn’t walk around hearing or saying the word racism, but we understood nuance in our small, rural town. We knew what a redneck was, what a confederate flag meant, and what to do if/when we were blatantly mistreated.

Racism made my grandmama mad and my mama tired, but to ameliorate the anger and exhaustion my family had ways of loving on each other by passing around sarcasm and humor embedded in our blackness. We started sentences with “Nigga please” and ended them with “with your black ass.” In response to some form of self-aggrandizement one would say, “Nigga please . . . go sit down somewhere!” And to punctuate a request, or soften a compliment, one would say, “C’mere . . . with your black ass,” or “I didn’t know your black ass could cook this good.” In response to an unwelcome or unreasonable request or comment, one would say “kiss my black ass!” This is how we showed we belonged to each other, and were just alike, and would be all right.

***

“Don’t make me slap the black off you,” the threat from my mother doesn’t alarm me because I don’t believe it is possible, and wouldn’t be disappointed if she could, in fact, slap some of the black off my skin. She is agitated because I have been crawling on my knees. She is disappointed because now they are turning black, burned from the carpet. She doesn’t understand why I don’t take better care of myself. She
insists that I bathe longer now, to salvage the parts of my skin that are still brown.

***

To be black with good hair was never quite as bad as just being black. My dark-skinned cousin with long hair says that black men like black women who look like white women dipped in chocolate. Blackgirls with white girl features were considered beautiful by everybody’s standards. Unlike many of us they didn’t have a face that only a Mama could love. I instinctively understood white girl beauty was something I would never be able to accomplish because I was dark-skinned. I never asked my cousin why being plain old black wasn’t beautiful, but I did beg for a black Barbie doll for Christmas.

***

We didn’t know sexism, but we paid attention when men walked in rooms and were always happy to see them, bending over backwards, grinning and fixing plates, eagerly catering to them. We loved them entirely, and since they were more absent than present, they usually disappeared before we could discern that their actions were grounded in privilege. We did not expect them to explain or keep promises.

***

Class had more to do with how you acted in public than how much money was in your pocket. To have class was to have nice things or to think you were better than everybody else. Some people said it was acting white—which made whiteness more desirable than being black.

Because everybody in the world wanted to be white-like.

Even other black people.

And in the media white women’s lives were often romanticized with fairy tale endings. They are automatically beautiful. Automatically loveable. Love and happy endings were automatically possible. But fairy tales and Prince Charmings only came in white.

***

When I was a teenager, my grandmother told me I was beautiful for the first time. She seemed surprised, tilting her head and concentrating on my features as if she had not seen my face every day of my life. “You’re a pretty ole dark-skinned girl,” she said half to me and half to herself. I knew she meant the words as a compliment, and I wouldn’t understand them to be problematic until years later. Her declaration made me feel seen. And pretty.

SAYIN’ #5: “BETTA NOT GET PREGNANT!”

At school they are not teaching us about sex, they are teaching us about our bodies. My mother never told me much about my body except that I should not touch it or talk about it. She seems uninterested and unconcerned that I am desperate to get the period that the woman at school told us about. She seems ambivalent that this, according to the woman at school, will mean I am a woman. Mama tells me I don’t know what I’m talking about, and that once I get my period, I’ll wish I never had it. I don’t believe her. I think she is trying to keep me from growing up. She doesn’t want me to know that when I have my period, the changes in my body will stop, the acne will clear up, and I will finally have some rest. She doesn’t want me to be a woman yet, and she doesn’t want me to know about sex yet, because I am only thirteen. She worries about what it will mean when I have a woman’s body, what I will do with it. She worries that if I know about sex I will be sweet talked by boys and be fast. She is annoyed about the woman at school who is telling me to embrace my womanhood. She does not offer a counter-narrative.

Sex is unspoken like sin yet ubiquitous in our little community. When my period finally comes, I am warned that I “betta not get pregnant.”

After menses I am accused of being pregnant every time there is a fish dream. In our family, if anyone dreams of fish or water it means someone (usually someone who has no reasonable relationship or business having sex, and no money or reliable income, or as my grandmother says, “No pot to piss in, or a window to throw it out of) is pregnant. The questions, “You pregnant?” and “You messing with boys?” feel like accusations. When I say no, they don’t believe me. Everyone in our already crowded house is angry until the pregnant person is discovered. No one ever apologizes for thinking it is me.

I hear my grandmother say women don’t ever get to go nowhere because they are tied down with babies and no-good husbands. I decide to not have any babies and never get married because I want to go places, be somebody. They shake their heads at my assertion and say I will want a baby, because that is what women do. When I say “Not me” they say I will probably get married early and have a house full of youngins.
When I try to prove my disinterest in babies by cutting open baby dolls, I am accused of being ungrateful. “That damn doll cost money. You don’t ‘preciate nothing.”

**SAYIN’ #6: “OUR HOUSE IS THE PO’ HOUSE”**

“Come on and go with me to the po’ house,” is my family’s favorite phrase, inviting neighbors and friends to follow us home. When I was a child, po’ wasn’t a derogatory term or an insult, it was the name of our house. I knew we weren’t rich, but I didn’t know we were poor.

Our modest house wasn’t big, but we had enough. Our yard and land were covered with broken glass, plastic soda bottles, trash bags, broken plates... everything but money. The paraphernalia in the dirt was evidence that before we lived there, the land we lived on was covered with whatever one could throw away and leave. Every time it rained a new layer of contraband would emerge from the dirt. Sometimes we left the buried trash on the ground, other times we would throw it away. The basketball goal, a gift for my sister, hung beneath trees too tall to cut down, and above stumps too stubborn to move so we didn’t play regular basketball, because you couldn’t run without falling. We played shooting games like O-U-T out and horse.

My uncle’s green Thunderbird with no tires and no hope sat defeated on cement bricks, surrounded by other junk cars and debris from our lineage’s childhoods—my aunt’s white cutlass, my grandmother’s brown sugar cougar. My grandmother owned over forty cars and totaled most of them. She kept the ones she didn’t wreck in the yard like ornaments. She was determined not to sell or give away anything she paid good money for. Her car was filled with other things we have no use for: old magazines, clothes long outgrown, pictures and mementos, simple things we can’t bear to let go of, but no longer had room for in the house. The car smelled like kerosene and musk, a constant reminder of how far we had come, and how far we had to go.

My car was filled with things I had out for, but a want, something extra, something she probably didn’t “need” no way (meaning it was a luxury that her mother could not afford). It could have been anything from candy to shoelaces, but it should have stayed in their own house. But this daughter was a poor, desperate, misguided thing, taking her no mind.

It was home, it was safe, and it was ours.

**SAYIN’ #7: “DON’T GO BEGIN’ NOBODY FOR NOTHING!”**

“Not love. Not money. Not respect! Don’t you go beggin’ nobody for nothing!”

I hadn’t done anything this time, but this was my warning, for future reference, based on the fact that she heard of somebody else’s child, thank God not one of her own, who had been going door to door begging for handouts, cause her own mama wasn’t paying her no mind. It wasn’t a need, or a necessity, that the girl had her hand out for, but a want, something extra, something she probably didn’t “need” no way (meaning it was a luxury that her mother could not afford). It could have been anything from candy to shoelaces, but it should have stayed in their own house. But this daughter was a poor, desperate, misguided thing, taking her mama’s business all around the neighborhood. She was too young to understand the embarrassment she was causing, and too poor to be ashamed, even though begging carries both of those words with it wherever it goes. She hadn’t been to our house yet, but grandma had already heard.

“Don’t let me hear tell of you going around beggin’ nobody for nothing. If they want you to have it, they’ll give it to you.”

I don’t bother asking who “they” are, or how “they” would know I needed something if I didn’t ask, because I know better than to ask questions, or talk back, or sass. This was a teachable moment. She was instilling pride. Showing me how to do without something I didn’t need in the first place. She was teaching me about having self-dignity. She was showing me how to avoid embarrassment and to only expect help and handouts from kinfolk.

Black families who live in the country make do with what other people don’t want. We eat the parts of the pig that everyone else throws away. Pig’s feet, ears, jaws, snout, brains, and chitlins were fried or boiled and drowned in vinegar and hot sauce, a delicacy only prepared for special occasions. Fixing chitlins was a time-consuming labor of love generally saved for Thanksgiving and Christmas. My grandmother would take hours “cleaning” the pork intestines before she cooked them. I never understood how with that much meticulous cleaning they still smelled like shit. It only took them about an hour to cook, but it would take all day to the get the smell out of the house. Still, little or nothing, we never perished for food. If you were hungry, my grandmother was Jesus, feeding the multitude with loaves and fishes. Everyone always left our house full.

Our furniture never matched, but we were happy. Always something fuchsia or orange, lime green, but never purple. The house always looked the same, clean or dirty. The orangey carpet, dark lace curtains, and brown walls never made me either proud or ashamed. It was home, it was safe, and it was ours.
MAMA’S LESSONS

The autoethnographies that I write are deeply influenced by my family and history. I adopted this approach so that (a) my research is never inaccessible to my family, and (b) I always remember, through my scholarship, to value the rich lived experiences I inherited from them. As an ethnographer I was trained to study people in different cultures through the way they live their lives and through the stories they tell about their lives. As an autoethnographer I was trained to study myself and my culture through personal narratives.

Daniel Taylor (2001) explains identity and narrative, saying:

You are your stories. You are the product of all the stories you have heard and lived—and of many that you have never heard. They have shaped how you see yourself, the world, and your place in it. Your first great storytellers were home, school, popular culture, and perhaps, church.

(p. 1)

Taken together, the seven sayin’s and stories in this chapter shaped me by offering a commentary on expectations for proper etiquette and lenient, but restrictive, gender scripts; the politics of intra-racial constructions of beauty in the black community; the consequences of racism on the psyche; the nuances of working classness; and survival strategies. The sayin’s provide a poetic and performative critique of larger hegemonic expectations that I was taught to equally resist and fulfill.

***

my mama taught me everything i ever needed to know
and she never went to any college
or took any night classes
or earned any degrees
or wrote any book
or traveled to any foreign countries
or spoke multiple languages
or saw her name in print
my mama graduated high school
homecoming queen who came back home
and raised two daughters with no help
the weight of it all, enormous
yet she never complained
instead she laughed and inspired laughter
danced without rhythm
taught without picking up a book
and loved without hesitation
my mama
who speaks in tongues, one of which is broken English
and sings salvation songs
with a voice that could set the world on fire
with words and sayin’s that said it all
and taught me everything i needed to know

WRITING STORY: AN EPILOGUE

After all this time, I am still my stories. I continue to “blacken” autoethnography by telling stories of the black, rural experience (Boylorn, 2017), and I have theorized blackgirl (one word) and blackgirl autoethnography (Boylorn, 2016) as a way of acknowledging and honoring the culture and sex-specificity of narratives written by and about black women and girls.

Re-reading, re-engaging, revising, and reflecting on this chapter reminded me that I have always written to deconstruct and reassemble stories in ways that reckoning with and even celebrate the parts of myself and my story I was socialized to despise, disguise, or be ashamed about. These vignettes continue to call upon memories and life lessons that are as significant and true now as they were three decades ago. One of the many gifts of autoethnography is the way it has allowed me to own myself and my experiences, through stories and retrospection, in ways that felt impossible when I was living through them. Autoethnography affirms experiences by marking moments and memories in ways that invite retrospective sensemaking. Instead of constantly criticizing myself, as I was taught to do, my autoethnography critiques the systems that created the instability or insecurity that fueled my discontent. Instead of believing that there are any cultural deficiencies in rural or black communities, my autoethnography celebrates where I am from and the ways it shaped who I am. Instead of absorbing negative stereotypes of black women and girls, I hone in on the realities of our lives that are often absent from the stories publicly told about us.

This reflexive and intentional autoethnographic excavation means navigating the complex terrain of criticizing the things I was taught, and the people who taught me, within the systems I critique (e.g., patriarchy, white supremacy, colorism, classism, misogyny, etc.), which is a complicated but necessary act of retrieval and survival. I am, and always will be, every story I have ever told, heard or lived (Taylor, 2001).
NOTES

1. Throughout the text I will use “sayin’s” rather than “sayings” to emulate the vernacular of my rural southern community.
2. For black folk with ethnic hair, a “kitchen” refers to the portion of your hair at the nape of the neck that is usually shorter and kinkier than the rest of your hair.
3. “Paying no mind” is a colloquialism for “not paying one any attention.”

REFERENCES


