Reconciled to Jargon

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Barbara Beckwith is a writer and a teacher. She is white. Since 2001, she has co-facilitated White People Challenging Racism: Moving From Talk to Action (wpcr-boston.org) a 5-session workshop co-led by multiracial (as of 2012) facilitators at the Cambridge (MA) Center for Adult Education and at area colleges. She has twice co-led White Privilege Conference workshops. Her essays, *What Was I Thinking? Reflecting on Everyday Racism* (2009) and *What Was I Thinking? Digging Deeper into Everyday Racism* (2012), are distributed by the racial justice publisher Crandall, Dostie and Douglass Books (cddbooks.com). She has a B.A. in English (Wellesley College), M. Ed (Tufts University) and an M.S. in Print Journalism (Boston University) and taught English in public high schools and journalism at Boston area colleges. She lives in Cambridge, MA. She co-edited the National Writers Union's S*trength in Diversity: A Handbook for Locals*, and co-authored FairTest's *Standing Up to the SAT* (Prentice-Hall), which scrutinizes racial bias and other inequities in standardized testing.

When I was active in the National Writers Union, a progressive labor union for freelance writers, I joined the union's diversity committee, whose mission was to speak out on issues facing writers of color, writers with disabilities, and LGBT writers. I was none of these, but the diversity committee was open to all members. At our committee meetings, we freely shared our identities, vigorously debated strategy, and devised campaigns to call for changes in mainstream publishing.

The more we met, however, the more we began to develop in-group language that we didn't realize might turn off others. At one of our union's national conventions, the leaders of our diversity committee opened our caucus meeting by asking each writer present to introduce himself or herself as a person of color, an LGBT person, a person with a disability—or as an "ally" of one or all of the above.

I readily introduced myself as white, straight, "temporarily able-bodied," and an ally of what our committee called "target groups." Others declared different—or multiple identities. But certain white attendees seemed taken aback by the words we used—words like "ally," which they hadn't heard before. They refused to label themselves, saying they wanted to just sit and observe.

Our caucus organizers mistakenly insisted: Since we felt comfortable with such labels, why shouldn't they? A few alienated members left, and we then faced accusations of "nomenclature puritanism." We, in turn, were offended at being so labeled. Mutual

respect went down the drain. We'd clearly failed to turn the incident into a learning moment.

Our diversity committee pursued our mission, but without the support of several white members who might otherwise have joined our efforts. Ever since, I've been leery of jargon, having experienced how in-group language can turn people off.

And yet now, years after that labeling misstep, as I try to understand racial inequality in the United States, I find myself reading books that are often full of specialized language.

Their authors string together words I'm familiar with in mystifying combinations such as "racial touristing," "aversive racism," or "the racialized other." Others create new words, such as "positionality," "interiority," "overprivilege," or "cyberwhitening." I wonder if such phrases come into being because academia assumes that cutting-edge concepts merit "neologisms"—academic lingo for newly created words.

Ordinarily, I'd bypass books that use such unfamiliar terminology. And yet, I have persisted in reading the texts, irritating though they may be, because I respect our shared commitment to understanding racism. Racial justice is too important an issue to me to turn away from, just because those who study it most closely use language that turns me off.

After a year or so of reading brain-straining books, however, I looked forward to attending a White Privilege Conference

aimed at grassroots activists—my type of folks. But even there, I was sometimes stymied by confusing code words. Take the conference's title itself: The term "white privilege" has historically stood for KKK attitudes. Antiracist activists now use the term to focus on what they see as the core problem: the myriad unearned advantages for white people that ought to be rights for all. But the term "white privilege" creates a problem if the general public doesn't know about this new usage.

When I told people about the upcoming event, I found myself introducing it by saying "I'm going to a conference about racial justice," and only later saying its title, in this way heading off shocked looks and assumptions that I support white supremacy.

At the conference, I was impressed by the array of workshops, keynotes, and caucuses. But some workshops sounded intimidating: those with titles such as "Microaggression," "Code-switching," and "Nadanolitization." Despite my wariness about such wording, I decided to attend them anyway, and found myself coming away with fresh perspectives and valuable information. I even brought home a t-shirt that I chose for its brilliant blue color, tolerating the jargon in the maxim on the back: "Interrogate your hidden assumptions."

Now, years later, I am slowly getting comfortable with antiracist terminology. In fact, I'm starting to use it myself. In the racial justice adult education course I've been co-leading, I find myself saying that the underlying cause of racial inequality is "systemic white privilege." I often get blank looks, so to make that abstract idea real, I use antiracist educator Peggy McIntosh's image of an invisible knapsack that white people carry, filled with unasked-for advantages wherever they go, from assumed credibility, intelligence, honesty, beauty, to access to institutions and people in power.

Despite my increasing comfort with jargon, I'm sometimes caught up short. For instance, an African American friend responded "bullshit" when I used the definition: "racism = race prejudice plus power." I tried to justify the concept behind the formula: That lacking institutionalized power to oppress, people of color can't be considered racist. But he was having none of it, and I realized that I was arguing for a theory that makes so much sense to a small group of antiracist activists, but no sense at all to almost everybody else.

I've since avoided using even the antiracist terminology to which I'd become accustomed: phrases such as "target groups," "trigger words," "code-switching," and "matrix of domination."

However, I'm softening, at least to jargon that's grounded in the day-to-day. Take "gate-keeping," a phrase that's widespread in antiracist circles. Yes, it's jargon, but at least I can picture a gate and a person who latches it or unlatches it. Such an everyday image helps me see how white people like myself have the power to keep gates closed to people of color or to open those gates of opportunity to everyone—in our workplaces, our schools, and our neighborhoods. The metaphor works for me. Same with "microaggressions"—a word

I now use to point out the soul-destroying effect of small, everyday racial stereotyping.

I particularly welcome fresh images, especially those coined by people of color, that jolt me into new perspectives. Ralph Ellison's metaphor of feeling like an invisible man "because people refuse to see me" gives me an idea of what it means to be black in America. W. E. B. Dubois's "double consciousness" image—" the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others"—shifts my outlook, as well. And when Beverly Daniel Tatum describes "cultural racism" as unseen and unhealthy fog that people of all colors breathe in daily, her metaphor gives her point visceral punch.

So the next time I encounter a catchphrase such as "the problem is not black underprivilege, but white overprivilege," I'll ignore my lingering resistance. Instead, I'll look at such words to help me consider anew what's right, what's wrong, and what we need to change.