Mr. Z.K. Matthews  
Batswana Delegation  
United Nations  
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Matthews,

A large and still growing number of books, booklets, and articles issue from the presses nowadays dealing with the problem of race and race relations in the United States and abroad. Retail researches and wholesale essays burden every medium of communication. The reason, of course is obvious; the issues involved are matters of great public concern.

The data for the researches are derived from polls, interviews, censuses, and other sources. Speculation without much data originate in armchairs. One source of enlightenment remains relatively unexplored, and this is personal experience.

Robert Park once wrote a paper entitled "Experience and Race Relations" but he did not in this particular paper reveal his own experiences which led him to an interest in the general study of the subject and to the many insights which have enriched the understanding of the rest of us. He was concerned, rather, with pointing out the importance of going behind the formal facts into the experiences of ordinary and non-professional men and women the better for professionals to understand popular reactions. He was concerned with the nature of experience generally and what it might show when gathered through the method of life histories.

Those who professionally study, write about, and teach courses dealing with race and race relations also have lived through racial experiences which presumably for them have an added dimension, an intellectual dimension, gained by pitting their own observations against the books they have read. Their personal experiences have not merely been had but have been reflected upon, communicated to others, and made known to them.

A volume containing a number of short autobiographies of professional students of race relations and oriented toward the kind of experiences which taught them something about the matter might prove to be a very interesting, not to say a very important, contribution to the literature. If you will read Horace Cayton's Long Old Road (Strident Press, 1963) you may understand better what I am trying to get at. What I have in mind is a series of papers in which the authors attempt to re-live their pasts without liberal or conservative distortion and to interrogate themselves on the meaning of the racial encounters they have experienced during their lives. How did they get to know what they think they know now? How have their own experiences induced in them shifts in states of mind and of outlook, of conversion and of reconversion, of emotion and of contemplation? What have their experiences taught them about race and race relations which they in turn try to teach their students if they are teachers?
Does the proposed book strike you as worth-while and, if so, would you consider contributing a paper of, say, between 7,500 and 10,000 words to it? I am addressing a letter similar to this one to a number of others who may be interested. Perhaps you can suggest the names and addresses of persons whom you think ought to be approached, persons who may have some special story to tell, e.g., Indians, Mexicans, Africans, Japanese, Chinese immigrants, etc., or professionals who have worked with such ethnics. A reaction at your earliest convenience will be appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

Edgar T. Thompson