

PROGRESSIVE MYSTIQUE

A Study of the Life of Miami's Dr. John Ollis Brown and a Reflection on the Obligations,
Privileges, and Ethics of a Physician Activist



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Introduction

This work has roots in my consideration of the role of a physician activist. It is a work of historical research. It is also a reflection on the roles, ethical conundrums, and obligations of a physician drawn into the profession with a sense of altruism. As I am months from graduating with my Doctor of Medicine degree, I find my mind often drifting to thoughts of the monumental privilege I am about to acquire. I think of what it means to begin a career that is both fundamentally philanthropic and often-times elitist. I am faced with a series of questions: Did I really choose to enter medical school to help people? What will I do with the comparatively exorbitant amount of money I will make? What debt do I owe society? How much should I use my privilege to prioritize my own well-being and that of my family and friends? Would a more selfless decision have been to enter a career of public service? Does the social cache and financial compensation of the American physician negate the supposed altruism of the career? And perhaps most importantly: What choices should I make if I aspire to a life of selflessness and service?

This work also springs from a love of archival historical research that began during my undergraduate education. It seems that the most clear and profound distillation of a person's priorities, ideas, and perspectives can only be uncovered by reviewing his or her own collections, the set of items that he or she wanted to remain in public posterity. In college, I investigated the public and private discourse surrounding the opposition to desegregation in Virginia during the era of the Civil Rights Movement. Fascinated by this period and the people who worked toward formal public freedom for black Americans, eager to combine this interest with my medical school education, and after consultation with my advisor, I came upon the papers of Dr. John Ollis Brown, the first black ophthalmologist in Florida and a leader in the local Civil Rights Movement in Miami-Dade County, Florida. One of this study's goals is to provide historical context to Dr. John O. Brown's life, chronicle his role in the desegregation and equality movements in South Florida in the twentieth century, and to highlight the uniqueness of Miami-Dade County with respect to the Civil Rights Movement. Another goal of this study is to critically analyze his complex views on the role of government, sex equity, health equity, wealth, and the profession of medicine.

I have no desire to tarnish Dr. John O. Brown's legacy, nor do I contend that his occasional problematic views detract from his meaningful work fighting for the freedom of black Americans. Instead, I intend to complicate his outward piety and use his life and story to think about the complexities and obligations of a progressive physician activist. As I embark on this study, it is important to note that I am a white man of considerable privilege myself. William Chafe, a scholar specializing in the history of the Civil Rights Movement in North Carolina, coined the term "progressive mystique" to characterize the outward liberalism and progressivism that many metropolitan areas in North Carolina employed to deflect attention from sinister policies and customs of oppression.¹ In her comprehensive account of the history of black oppression in Miami, Chanelle Rose asserts that this term also characterizes Miami during this time period, a tropical, tourism-obsessed, booming metropolis deeply concerned with appearance and clandestinely struggling with entrenched systems of racism like any other city in the urban

¹ William H. Chafe, and Societies American Council of Learned, *Civilities and Civil Rights : Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom*, Oxford Paperbacks. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

American south.² I reemploy this term once more to characterize Dr. John O. Brown, a man that seemingly defined himself by his progressive bona fides but harbored sexist attitudes, lived a life of relative opulence surrounded by gritty poverty, and sometimes prioritized the preeminence and power of the physician over needs of the patient. I argue that the role of the physician activist can be characterized by “progressive mystique” as well. As such, it is the duty of the well-meaning physician activist to interrogate her or his motives and reflect on her or his intentions. That is the primary purpose of this study.

PART 1: THE CITY

Waves of Immigration to the Tropical Paradise

Before Miami became the so-called “capital of Latin America,” the area was the home to the Tequesta tribe of Native Americans. After the periods of Spanish control, Florida was admitted to the Union in 1845, was a member of the Confederacy during the American Civil War, and would reenter the Union at the end of the war as a state destined to have distinct subcultures and locational uniqueness. As the northern three quarters of the state would resemble much of the rest of the south with its agriculture-based economy and plantation-driven reliance on the African slave trade, South Florida and specifically the area now known as Miami-Dade County, would experience different forms of immigration and would not grow into the thousands in population until the late nineteenth century, culminating with the explosive growth of South Florida in the twentieth century, interestingly deeply intertwined with the rise and widespread use of air conditioning.³

In the mid-nineteenth century, the economy of the Bahamas collapsed, spurring the first massive wave of black Bahamian migration to the Florida Keys and present-day Miami-Dade

² Channele N. Rose, and Muse Project, *The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami : Civil Rights and America's Tourist Paradise, 1896-1968, Making the Modern South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

https://locate.coventry.ac.uk/openurl/COV/COV_VU1?u.ignore_date_coverage=true&rft.mms_id=996576887602011.

³ Arsenault, Raymond. “The End of the Long Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture.” *The Journal of Southern History* 50, no. 4 (1984): 597–628.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2208474>

County.⁴ These settlers inhabited the present-day neighborhood of Coconut Grove, previously spelled “Cocoanut Grove.” Interestingly, if one strolls the peacock-filled streets during the present-day, one will come across this antiquated spelling. Specifically, many of these Black Bahamian immigrants settled in an area then called “Colored Town,” now known as the West Grove. Unsurprisingly, the boundaries of “Colored Town” are still easy to identify when exploring Coconut Grove, with the lush, tropical gardens, Key West style bungalows, and picturesque streets characteristic of the white-majority East Grove becoming noticeably sparser and with worse infrastructure as one travels to the west part of the neighborhood.⁵

The “Colored Town” became a bustling hub of black-owned businesses and culture as more Bahamian immigrants moved to the neighborhood and found jobs in the burgeoning tourist economy. Jobs began flowing to Miami-Dade County through businesses such as Flagler’s railroad extending from Palm Beach down through Miami-Dade and toward the Florida Keys and the inception of the now-famous tourism industry with the Royal Palm Hotel. The early twentieth century saw the growth of Miami Beach, further cementing Miami’s position as a tourism behemoth and cultivating some of the racial inequities that would frame the struggle for black freedom later in the twentieth century. As tourism to the city grew, only whites were able to enjoy the luxuries of the tropical paradise, while black residents were not allowed to experience the beaches, clubs, pools, and hotels. Instead, they were tasked with building these amenities, staffing them, and serving the primarily white patrons that enjoyed them. This tourism-founded system of segregation and oppression is somewhat distinct from the more traditional plantation and agriculture-based systemic oppression common to much of the southern United States. Much of the public protest during the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century focused on these areas of leisure. Moreover, much of the civil rights work of Dr. John O. Brown also focused on creating racial equity in these same spaces of tourism and leisure.⁶

Along with its systems of racial oppression moving within Miami’s position as a tropical tourist destination, Miami’s unique patterns of migration and immigration from the rest of the United States and Latin America created a racial dynamic that other centers in the urban South did not experience. As the black American population grew in the area, tensions arose between the black Americans and the black Bahamians. With their dual identities as black and non-American, the black Bahamians were often treated worse than the black Americans by the whites of Miami. This tension is incapsulated by the growth of the Union Jack as a symbol for freedom in the black Bahamian community in Miami. Families would fly the Union Jack during public events, decrying the oppression they experienced in the United States and cementing their place as distinct from the growing black American community. Additionally, throughout the twentieth century, waves of immigration from Cuba and the rest of Latin America further complicated race relations in the city. Miami-Dade County’s neighbor to the north, despite being only miles away, experienced immigration and race relations in a more traditionally Southern American fashion. In fact, in his thesis, Richard Kelleher chronicles the history of the black community in Broward County and specifically argues for the disparate histories of the two counties, going so far as to

⁴ Rose, and Project.

⁵ Rose, and Project.

⁶ Ibid.

suggest that his work simply does not apply to Miami-Dade County.⁷ All of this is to say that the story of racism, oppression, and black struggle in Miami is unique. It is within this context that Dr. John. O Brown began his work during the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century.

The South's Progressive Haven

Though black Bahamians and black Americans continued to be shut out from white society as the twentieth century progressed, the overall black population in Miami continued to grow and with it, a developed and robust business community. This created a class of comparatively wealthy black businessmen who began to capitalize on the reputation of the Magic City. Dr. William B. Sawyer, a native Floridian and physician who was instrumental in the founding of the Christian Hospital, the only hospital that took care of black Miamians for much of the twentieth century, also used his money and social standing to build the Mary Elizabeth Hotel in the heart of “Colored Town.”⁸ This hotel became a major tourist destination for black families with the means to travel to South Florida for vacation. When advertising his hotel, Dr. Sawyer would promote Miami as a progressive and free oasis in the otherwise racist swamp that was the Southern United States. This was a commonplace argument made by Miami’s growing black elite; using the progressive mystique of Miami to draw customers. Though it is true that Miami had less KKK activity and perhaps fewer nationally known conflicts between black and white Miamians, black residents were still second-class citizens and the city remained nearly fully segregated until decades after Dr. Sawyer’s and other black businessmen’s claims. Much of the city remains segregated today.

One of these black leaders went as far as to say that Miami was the “Negro’s New Jerusalem,” touting “her close proximity to Cuba, Hayti, and Jamaica, mak(ing) her a great gateway between the negro tropical belt and the great Temperate Zone of the white race of the United States.”⁹ As years progressed, even the Governor of Florida during the 1950s, LeRoy Collins would tout Florida, especially South Florida, as a progressive haven. He ignored Florida’s history of “lynching, black codes, one-party rule, and Jim Crow segregation” and talked about racial moderation, “New South progressivism” and a more moderate response to *Brown v. Board of Education* compared to the “massive resistance” of other southern states like Virginia.¹⁰ As tourism grew, South Florida’s population ballooned, and as progressives migrated to Miami from New York and other Northeastern cities, the reputation of Miami as a liberal tropical paradise with a progressive mystique solidified. In this mystique entered Dr. John O. Brown, coloring and framing not only his work for equity and desegregation in Miami but also his views on his role in Miami’s black elite.

⁷ Richard V. Kelleher, “The Black Struggle for Political and Civil Rights in Broward County, 1943-1989” (Florida Atlantic University, 1990).

⁸ Rose, and Project.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Rose, and Project.

PART II: THE ACTIVIST

The Young Man from Oklahoma Heads South

Dr. John Ollis Brown was born on October 23rd, 1922, in Colbert, Oklahoma, a small town near the Texas border. He grew up next door to one of the first black physicians in Oklahoma, Dr. George Thomas Gray. On summer nights, he would sit on Dr. Gray's porch and hear stories about the life of a doctor.¹¹ Dr. Gray would also emphasize the importance of black physicians in the future of healthcare to a then young Brown. In 1938, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, already set on a pre-medicine curriculum. Before graduation, World War II broke out and he was drafted. Because of his education, he was sent to officer training school in Georgia. He would serve his country as a lieutenant in the segregated Ninety-second Division, famously known as the "Buffalo Soldiers," fighting the Axis powers in Europe, where he suffered multiple injuries. His first injury resulted from a Jeep collision amid battle, resulting in a concussion and kidney injury that would contribute to his death decades later. A year after the collision, he was struck by a mortar shell and spent nineteen months in the hospital recovering from his substantial injuries. For this, he was awarded a Purple Heart.¹² (see appendix D)

Brown would later return to the United States, where he reunited with his wife, Marie Louise Faulkner, whom he had met while they were students at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. They had married just before he began his military service and upon his return in 1946, they set out to Nashville, Tennessee where Brown continued on his path to medicine at Meharry Medical College, an HBCU that was one of the few medical schools in the country to consistently accept black students. He would then go on to general surgery and ophthalmology residency at the Veteran's Administration Hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama. Brown and his wife would have four children during these years of medical training. Intrigued by the progressive mystique of Miami, hopeful about this burgeoning southern city that was supposedly less hostile toward black Americans, Brown moved the family to Liberty City, a predominantly black neighborhood in Miami, and started his ophthalmology practice on 1121 NW Third Avenue, thus designating him with the title he would laud in the years to come: the first black ophthalmologist in the state of Florida. Though he admittedly did not set out to become a physician activist, now situated as a leader in the community, a man of means, and veteran of the armed forces, he became tired of the constant discrimination he faced. Whether it was the common racist comments by patients as he met them before an ophthalmologic procedure or the fact he could not "go to the movies, try on clothes at Burdines, eat at restaurants such as the Royal Castle, or

¹¹ Yeleny Suarez, "Ex-Doctor Changed Adopted City for the Better," *Miami Herald* (Miami), October 20, 2002, 2002.

¹² Ibid.

stay at any hotel or motel simply because of the color of his skin,” Brown became an advocate for change. In his own words he said, that “the atmosphere (in Miami) had to change.” That it was a “city run by tourism and opportunities had to arise.”¹³ Brown hoped to make Miami’s progressive mystique a reality.

CORE and Equity on the Beach

In the late 1950s, much of the work toward equality for black Miamians was done via legal action through the Miami Chapter of the NAACP.¹⁴ This period also saw the critical alliance of Miami’s black elite and activists and the growing progressive Jewish activist population, a coalition that would prove critical in the next decades. There was a growing desire among these activists to wage “direct-action protests against segregated public areas.” For these Miamians, including Brown, the progressive mystique of the city was colliding into the city’s segregated public spaces. Moreover, during this time, the Latinization of Miami had become critical to the city’s identity and as always, the white and black elite in the city continued to project Miami as a bastion of southern progressivism, despite the entrenched segregation and anti-Semitism that was growing as Jewish people migrated to South Florida. It was during this time that the complicated racial relations in Miami became more noticeable and public. With the increasing immigration of those who identified as both black and Latino, a real change in the politics and demographics of the city’s white population from culturally Southern to culturally Northern, and the always paramount prioritization of Miami’s tourism industry, it became increasingly evident to the city’s elite, including Brown himself, that the Jim Crow systems that had been in place for decades were becoming increasingly untenable. This made Miami an increasingly intriguing destination for pushing the limits of non-violent advocacy against Jim Crow. It was 1959 when the national leader of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) “targeted Miami as the testing ground for its first non-violent direct-action protest below the Mason-Dixon line.”¹⁵ In his writings, he explicitly noted Miami’s “perceived moderate racial climate,” the growing group of progressive Jewish activists, and a racial structure that was less binary.

On March 12, 1959, a group of fifteen almost exclusively Jewish and black Miamians, most of them community leaders or wealthy businessmen, started the Greater Miami Congress of Racial Equality. Brown was in attendance, and much of his activism occurred through his involvement and later leadership in the Miami chapter of CORE.¹⁶ Brown was already a known quantity among Miami’s civil rights activist community, from his time working on legal battles to fight school segregation, and his role as the president of the Dade County Young Democrats Association. Brown was elected the first vice-chairman of the Miami Chapter of CORE and became instrumental in leading the organizations various sit-ins. When compiling his teams to join him in various acts of civil protest, Brown openly remarked that “the black middle and upper classes in Dade County assiduously avoided the Civil Rights Movement,” noting that “the level of fear was simply too high.”¹⁷ This further complicates Miami’s progressive veneer, highlighting the brutal reality of Miami’s Jim Crow systems. In 1959, Brown would lead dozens of activists to participate in sit-ins throughout the city, such as W.T. Grant’s Five & Dime Store.

¹³ Suarez.

¹⁴ Rose, and Project.

¹⁵ Rose, and Project.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gregory Wallace Bush, and ProQuest, *White Sand, Black Beach : Civil Rights, Public Space, and Miami's Virginia Key* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2016).

Perhaps most famous of his sit-ins was at Burdine's Department Store, which interestingly occurred a year before the nationally famous Greensboro sit-ins.¹⁸ Though it would take years before much of Miami's Jim Crow laws were officially undone, these initial non-violent protests would not only move Miami forward, but also were used by CORE's national leadership team as a model for non-violent protest in potentially more inhospitable environments.

For decades, Virginia Key was the only public beach that black Miamians could use to enjoy the beautiful tropical climate of South Florida. Martin Luther King Jr. was known to vacation in Miami and would often visit Virginia Key.¹⁹ Brown reported to once have met King at Virginia Key, noting that he and King chatted and King mentioned that "if you ever hold any civil rights events in Miami, I'd be glad to come down and help you."²⁰ During that same period between 1959 and 1961, Brown, as the leader of CORE, led a "wade-in" at Crandon Beach, the larger and previously white-only beach a few miles from Virginia Key. This led to a non-violent confrontation between Dade County officials and the "wade-in" activists. Worried about tarnishing Miami's progressive veneer, then Mayor Robert King High, along with an increasingly progressive set of city officials and community leaders, passed policies to integrate Crandon Beach. Though this did spark white backlash, most concerning from Florida's attorney general, Richard Ervin, the beaches remained integrated.²¹ Brown would also be involved in the integration of Miami Springs Golf Club and a sit-in at the Olympia Theater in Downtown Miami.²² Though Brown only led a handful of these sit-ins, he remained a member of CORE throughout the 1960s and continued to participate in these varied acts of non-violent resistance.

Gladeview Elementary School and the Fight for Desegregation of Dade County Schools

Perhaps Dr. John O. Brown's most well-known contribution to black freedom in Miami came before his work for CORE, when overtly legal activism, using the NAACP's systems, was the primary method of activism towards desegregation. About two years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Brown's son, John O. Brown Jr. was ready to begin school. Brown was already entrenched into Miami's activism community and had been close with members of the Miami branch of the NAACP such as Otis James, Father Gibson, and Richard Powell.²³ Mrs. Marie Brown attempted to enroll John O. Brown Jr. at Gladeview Elementary School, a nearby all-white school. When the Browns received a letter from the Dade County School Board saying that John O. Brown Jr. was assigned to the all-black Poinciana Elementary School, further from the Browns' home in Liberty City, Brown and the other members of the Miami chapter of the NAACP filed a lawsuit, alleging that the Dade County School Board was violating *Brown v.*

¹⁸ Irvin D. S. Winsboro, *Old South, New South, or Down South? : Florida and the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, First edition. ed. (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2009). <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northumbria/detail.action?docID=3417011>
https://librarysearch.northumbria.ac.uk/openurl/44UON/44UON_SP?u.ignore_date_coverage=true&rft.mms_id=991003222099703181.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jennifer Maloney, "Area's History Brings Together Two Generations," *Miami Herald* (Miami)2000.

²¹ Bush, and ProQuest.

²² Abraham J. Thomas, A Real American Hero, Dr. John O. and Marie Faulkner Brown papers, University of Miami Special Collections Library

²³ Rose, and Project.

Board of Education, the first of its kind in the state of Florida. The lawsuit was initially dismissed multiple times by federal Judge Emmett Choate. Because of these dismissals, a new group of attorneys, including the now-famous Constance Baker Motley, brought the lawsuit to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans in 1957, which overturned Choate's previous dismissals. However, because of the increasing cost and time-consuming nature of bringing the lawsuit back to Dade County for enforcement, John O. Brown Jr. would never attend Gladeview Elementary. Instead, years later in the 1960s, Gala Brown, Brown's only daughter, would attend Gladeview Elementary School for sixth grade as one of the school's first black pupils (see appendix A).²⁴ Though dozens of cases also worked to end segregation in Dade County's schools, that first lawsuit in which Brown was a plaintiff was critical in the fight for equal and integrated education in South Florida.²⁵

PART III: THE PHYSICIAN

The Wooster School and A Real American Hero

Two years after the lawsuit, Brown sent his son to the prestigious Wooster School in Danbury, Connecticut. It is this decision where I begin to complicate Brown's views and legacy and where I introduce perhaps the most interesting finding in the files and papers that Brown donated to the University of Miami after his death: the manuscript of the "biography" of Brown written by Reverend Abraham J. Thomas (see appendix D). Thomas self-published this biography through a publishing cooperation in Miami that has only published other works by Thomas himself. The book is an astonishingly saccharine and adulation-filled account of Brown's life and views, including many of Brown's own words. The book verges on near-worship of Brown and is titled *A Real American Hero*. Though much of the book's account of Brown's life closely mirrors the other sources I used, the manuscript provides fascinating insight into a few of Brown's views. While important to note that the book is so unabashedly adoring of Brown and thus not an ideal source for much of Brown's work in Miami's Civil Rights Movement, it was sanctioned by Brown and is likely a good representation of how Brown wanted to be remembered. The book was completed after many interviews with Brown, and Thomas wrote about Brown in a congenial, familiar tone.²⁶

In *A Real American Hero*, Thomas addresses Brown's decision to send his son to the Wooster School where he writes:

It was during this time (around 1958) that John, Jr. went to prep school, the Wooster School in Danbury Connecticut. His parents' decision to send him away to school was based on their determination to provide the optimum opportunity to nurture the brilliant intellect he possessed. Dr. Brown didn't want him to waste his intelligence. Dr. Brown can't remember now whether he had thought, *he's also going to be a doctor* when he named his first son John O.L. Brown, Jr. But, he's quick to admit that if it wasn't in his

²⁴ Gala Brown Munnings, "Desegregation Pioneer Recalls School Integration in Miami," *Miami Herald* (Miami)2013.

²⁵ Godfrey Oliver Cross, Desegregation of Miami-Dade County Public Schools 1954-1959, Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy2006.

²⁶ Thomas.

mind then, it surely wasn't long before he did. Being a doctor was what he had always wanted for his son John, Jr. In the days when Dr. Brown was coming up, the title meant that an individual had reached the pinnacle of educational pursuit. Simply put, Negroes had no higher ambitions than to become a doctor.²⁷ (see appendix M)

Most parents want their children to become successful adults, and becoming a physician is undoubtedly a marker of professional success. However, the tone and language used by Thomas to characterize Brown's decision to send his son to boarding school is striking when considering the legal battle that Brown had instigated two years earlier. Brown was advocating deeply for equal access to quality public education, sending his other children to the black-only schools of Dade County until they were integrated in the 1960s, and also extolling the virtues of sending his first son to an expensive boarding school, where he would be one of the few non-white students, thereby bypassing the public system that he was working to better through his activism. I do not blame Brown for opening doors for his children. However, it does make me consider how inconsistent the decision to send a child to private school is with the ideals he espoused for an equal public education for all. This is a decision that many upper-class Americans still make, including many physicians. Should we bypass our public institutions in favor of private institutions that reinforce and multiply our privilege? What obligations does a person committed to a life of advocacy and service have to their children? Should a parent give their children an advantage over others?

John O. Brown Jr. would eventually graduate at the top of his class at Wooster School, attend Harvard College and his father's alma mater, Meharry Medical College, and become a physician just like his father had hoped. It seems reasonable to assert that this trajectory would have been far more difficult if John O. Brown Jr. had attended the segregated schools in Dade County. This is where I want to point out Brown as another example of progressive mystique: a man outwardly and mostly sincerely fighting on behalf of a more equitable society for all, then using the very institutions that promote the supremacy of the white rich elite in this country so that his son can benefit. Brown used his power, privilege, and money as a physician to create an advantage for his son, the kind of advantages he decried in his discussion of civil rights. Being ethically consistent is a difficult and perhaps impossible task. Brown's decision to send his child to Wooster makes me consider what kind of choice I might make for my own child in the future.

Gala – Brown's Only Daughter

In *A Real American Hero*, Brown extolled the many accomplishments of his sons with fervor. However, he had a decidedly different view of his only daughter, Gala. Not only would Gala attend the segregated Dade County schools from grades one through five while her brother was off in Connecticut preparing for college, but also Brown had little expectations of Gala and was frankly sexist when discussing her as quoted in his sanctioned biography. Thomas notes that "Dr. Brown did not want a girl because he thought that it would be easier to raise a boy and that boys can accomplish more than girls!" When Brown later agreed that Gala could attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, he noted that "if he was a little ahead of the times in his thinking, he's glad of it."²⁸ Brown came to the what he considered "ahead of the times" realization that his daughter should possibly attend college, an oddly self-congratulatory perspective considering its fundamental sexism.

²⁷ Thomas.

²⁸ Thomas.

It is surely not surprising that an American man born in 1922 held sexist and misogynist views until the early 2000s when the interviews for A Real American Hero took place. What is surprising is the self-adulating tone with which he discusses his sexism. Intersectionality was not in the vernacular during most of Brown's life. Many civil rights leaders held what would now be considered blatantly sexist views. As such, I do not take issue with Brown's views evolving over time. Instead, I take issue with the book overall, which is an excellent encapsulation of the progressive mystique of Brown. The title of the book is a superlative triumph, and the book clearly seeks to portray Brown as nearly faultless. The author also seems pleased with Brown's current views of gender and sex equity, suggesting that Brown had learned his lesson on sexism when he allowed Gala to attend college. However, the book in fact holds many problematic views and disguises the complexity of Brown in a veneer of heroism.

The National Medical Association

Decades after his work for CORE, in 1984, Brown was elected to be president of the National Medical Association (NMA), the organization that represents the interests of black physicians and to some extent, the interest of black patients. Like the American Medical Association (AMA) is both a lobbying firm advocating for physicians and an organization meant to advocate for patients, sometimes letting the former have priority over the latter. Though I could not glean much about the day-to-day functions and events that coincided with his time leading the organization, his papers included a few scribbled and edited drafts of speeches that he gave to the organization at various galas and fundraisers. When he was elected at president of the NMA, he gave an inaugural address at a gala in New York City. In the speech, he notes that "there is a great fear in the land for the survival of the Private Practice of Medicine. This is expressed in what we see as the increasing involvement of the Federal Government with its rules and regulations and laws." He focuses on the "disastrous underestimate on the cost of Medicare in 1965." He spends most of the speech asserting that payments to physicians are so low due to an "insurance holocaust" and that "M.D.s are having to abandon practice altogether." He decries that this decrease in payments to physicians "is a critical national problem that can no longer be studied, discussed, and debated. It is a problem that deserves priority national attention and action by Congress."²⁹

In another speech to the NMA a bit later in his tenure, entitled "Crisis in Health Care for Black Americans," he points to many of the social determinants that often make the lives of black Americans less healthy. However, he then almost single-handedly blames the low overall numbers of black physicians on the "continuing influx of Foreign Medical Graduates," suggesting that they have a "deleterious effect on the health of black communities."³⁰ Though he does rightly point that there was an increase in Foreign Medical Graduates in 1980s, his description of them borders on xenophobia. In his role as the president of the NMA, Brown had a few different interests and identities to balance and contend with: a leader, a physician, a black man, an American, an activist, a Democrat, a wealthy man. I do not envy that complicated balance. His role was to advocate for the well-being of black physicians, an undeniably honorable pursuit. However, the assertion that the relative decrease in physician payments through Medicare is a "critical national problem" is ludicrous. Even the worst-paid physicians are in the top five percent of income earners in the country. Brown also gave this speech when

²⁹ John. O Brown, Dr. John O. and Marie Faulkner Brown papers, 1950-2000., University of Miami Special Collections Library

³⁰ Ibid.

levels of student debt among physicians was far lower than today. Brown would also traffic in blaming the Foreign Medical Graduates as the group making it difficult for black physicians to thrive, a saddening foray into xenophobia and an unnuanced way of thinking about the barriers for black Americans to become physicians. With his multiple identities in conflict, Brown chose to prioritize his identity as a physician during his time as president of the National Medical Association.

An Affluent Oasis in the Midst of a Slum

When the Browns first settled in Miami in the early twentieth century, they chose Liberty City as their home, partially out of necessity. During much of Miami's early years, Liberty City was one of the few neighborhoods available to black residents. Throughout much of his time in Miami, Brown would keep the family in Liberty City, despite growing availability outside the neighborhood as the Jim Crow systems slowly crumbled. In 1968, after Brown's primary years of activity at CORE, Brown and his family were profiled in *Tropic Magazine*, in a fascinating article that nearly perfectly encapsulates the idea of the progressive mystique. The article is titled "an affluent oasis in the midst of the slum."³¹ The "slum" in this case is Liberty City and the "affluent oasis" is the Brown's home.

The article is part of a larger magazine feature with an overall title of "Miami's Negro Elite" and a subtitle of "Living like a Whitey (Almost)." The article describes the black elite of Miami as "not part of the country club set, yet no longer an integral part of the black community," noting that "Miami's affluent Negro families live in a limbo land of physical prosperity and uncertain identity." In this article, Brown's connection to CORE and his years of activism are only tangentially mentioned. Instead, the writer mentions his "expensive car that sits in front of his big home." Brown notes that he developed "this area out of pride," referring to the set of larger homes with lush gardens and high walls, set within what Brown describes as "Miami's northwest ghetto." Much of the rest of the article continues on astonished that black families in Miami are able to afford luxury items and spends considerable time detailing the role of black fraternities and sororities among the black elite of Miami. It tells the story of a community between two worlds, figuring out how to use the privilege that comes with wealth without abandoning their blackness. Perhaps the most compelling and elucidating part of the piece is the two photographs of the Brown family (see appendix B and cover page). In one photograph, Brown is seen lounging by his pool, happily accepting a cold beverage from his wife who is leaning over him in a subservient pose. His seemingly expensive watch is in full view and his daughter, Gala is seen in the background, smiling and posing in a two-piece swimsuit. In the background, we see the lush gardens of the Brown home. Further behind those gardens, we see another house, perhaps the house of another member of Miami's black elite, or perhaps a home just outside the affluent oasis, where the poverty of Liberty City is less disguised.³²

Should an accomplished ophthalmologist not be afforded a pool and pleasant home to enjoy? Of course not. However, there are a few aspects of this profile that complicate his life as an activist. First, though Brown points out that he chooses to remain in Liberty City because of his work "developing it," he does admit to walling himself off from the unsavory parts of the neighborhood. He lives blocks away from the rest of Miami's black community but is physically and financially separated from them. Moreover, he is verging on flaunting his wealth in the piece. I find this tension fascinating and similar to the tension that most physicians will face as

³¹ Brown.

³² Brown.

they amass wealth and consider their place in the community. Brown has accepted his role as a man of means and feels comfortable projecting his wealth. The photographs of Brown in the piece also point to his role as the family patriarch, happy to be served by his wife, hinting to his self-professed sexism that was discussed in A Real American Hero. This is the progressive mystique of Brown. He is a civil rights activist and he is a wealthy landowner living in an oasis in a slum. He helped desegregate Crandon Beach and he enjoys relaxing by the pool as he is served beverages by his wife.

In the process of building their home in Liberty City, a city of Miami inspector had to come to the house to approve the building, specifically the pool. According to Brown and detailed by Thomas in A Real American Hero, “the inspector immediately decided that the diggings (in the backyard for the pool) had not passed inspection.” The inspector then commented “this is the first negro pool in the City of Miami and it’s not passing.” Thomas goes on to say that Brown “called the City’s inspection department and explained who he was, suggesting that they respond immediately. The administrators had heard of Dr. Brown and did not want to trouble him.”³³ This exchange includes a fascinating set of interactions between privileges and identities. Brown first experiences blatant racism from the inspector. He then employs his privilege as both a man of means and a fixture in the community to overcome the racism in the moment and gain the ability to build his pool and home in the heart of Liberty City. This moment mirrors his actual place in Miami and the building he was seeking to erect: both black and a wealthy physician in a world where this was challenging and complicated.

In the 1990s, Brown and his wife would leave their Liberty City home and move to the Sandpiper condominium community in North Miami Beach.³⁴ With Brown diagnosed with kidney failure, at least somewhat as a result from his injuries in World War II, Brown noted that he needed a bit more help and no longer desired to keep up their four-bedroom home of many decades. Brown had moved to Liberty City in a time when Jim Crow laws were in place and his sheer existence as a black physician was an affront to the white elite of Miami. He would leave Liberty City in a different era and move to a part of Miami-Dade County that had previously been unavailable to him. He left a community that was still seething from poverty and discrimination, for the perfectly acceptable reason that he needed more help and less space in his golden years. However, his leaving is also symbolic of his complex life. He was no longer the young physician activist from Liberty City, organizing sit-ins and pushing against the power structures of the time. He was a physician of means, finishing out life with peace and comfort.

³³ Thomas.

³⁴ Suarez.

PART IV: THE REFLECTION

Brown was profiled in *Look Magazine* in 1959 for an edition highlighting the state of Florida.³⁵ Though the profile was essentially a biography of Brown that did not elucidate new information about his life, the title of the magazine's overall Florida profile struck me. It was called "Florida: A state of mind, a state of frolic, a state of profit, a state of tension" (see appendix G). This phrase not only captures the complicated nature of the Sunshine State, but it also encapsulates the idea that this work explored: the progressive mystique. In the history of race in Miami, the life of Dr. John. O Brown, and in the role of a physician activist, I see this consistent tension between veneer and truth, between outward appearance and personal intentions, between selflessness and selfishness. The state of Florida and Miami specifically wanted to be perceived as progressive tropical paradises, hiding the entrenched inequality and injustice of the black experience. Dr. John O. Brown wanted to be perceived as a civil rights hero, often choosing to prioritize that identity while also harboring problematic views on sex and flaunting his wealth. Most physician activists choose their career with good intentions, often shying away from a discussion of the privilege, wealth, and social cache that comes along. This is the tension that I will attempt to navigate as the years progress.

If one looks at Brown's life in totality, there is much to admire, much to look up to, and much to emulate. While most Miamians shied away from engaging in non-violent protest to segregation, Brown organized and acted. He became a physician to help his community and led a group of black physicians that for the most part, sought to improve the health and wellness of black Americans. From my perspective, Brown had a few moral blind spots. He espoused sexist views and unabashedly employed his privilege as a wealthy physician to benefit himself and his family. Though I am less worried about my own views on the equality of the sexes, I do have some concern about my ability to use my current and upcoming privilege in as moral and selfless a way as possible. Using privilege selflessly exists on a spectrum. Perhaps the most selfless act would be for me to donate all my earnings to charities and only keep what is necessary to subsist. I do not anticipate doing this. I do feel that to some extent, I have worked hard given my own advantages and disadvantages and should be allowed some luxuries in life. But where do I draw the line? What luxuries are reasonable for a physician activist who wants to devote his career to reducing child poverty and helps kids and families thrive? To what extent will my own life be one of progressive mystique: an outwardly progressive physician activist who uses his own privilege to make his and his family's lives better? I do not yet know the answer to these questions and perhaps I never will. My study of the history of race in Miami and the life of Dr. John O. Brown has brought these questions to the forefront of my mind. It has made me consider how my actions might be judged in the future. It has made me deeply consider if I would send my kids to private school, spend money on ski vacations, or simply live in a wealthy neighborhood that is likely majority white. As I embark on my residency training, I hope to continue asking these questions. I hope to use my privilege selflessly. I hope that I can emulate

³⁵ Bob Lerner, "The Negro in Florida," *Look*, 1959.

the life of Dr. John O. Brown in some ways, but not in others. It is an honor and a gift to become a physician. I sure do hope that I use that gift for the good of the many, not of the few.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix A: Gala Brown Entering Gladeview Elementary as one of the First Black Students



Appendix B:
John O. Brown with family at house in Liberty City



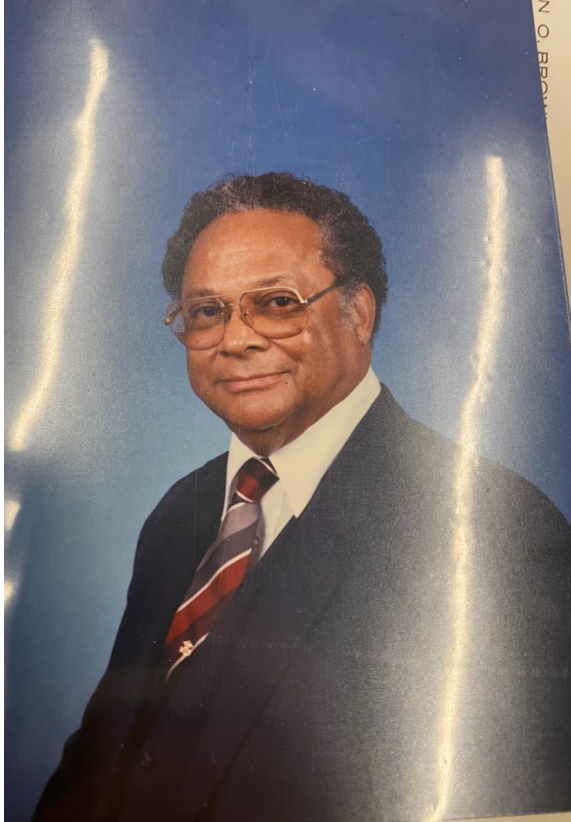
Appendix C:
The Cover of A Real American Hero



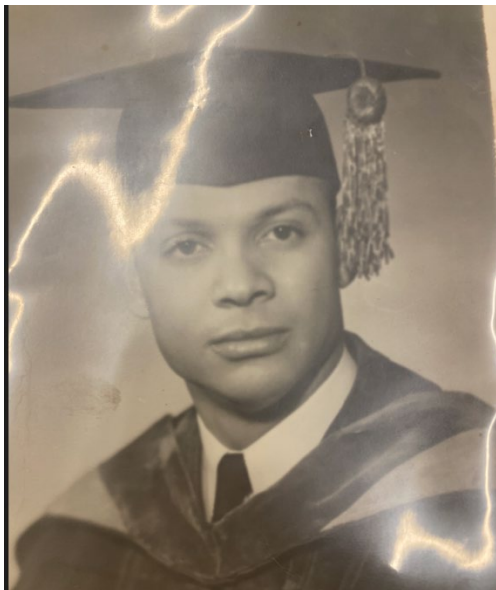
Appendix D:
John O. Brown's Purple Heart



Appendix E:
John O. Brown during his Tenure as President of the NMA



Appendix F:
John O. Brown at his Graduation from Meharry Medical College



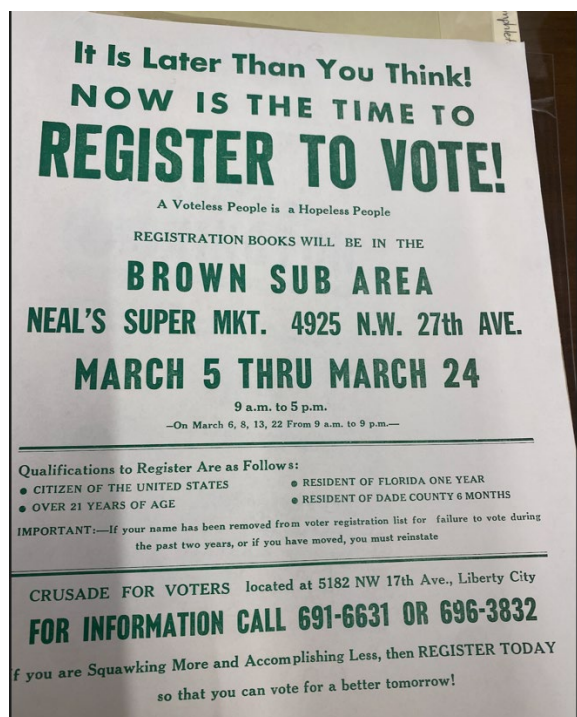
Appendix G:
Florida: A State of Mind



Appendix H: The Negro in Florida



Appendix I: John O. Brown Jr.'s Term Bill at Harvard College



Appendix L:

John O. Brown with Former Governor and Senator Bob Graham



Appendix M:

Letter from Wooster School Detailing John. O Brown Jr.'s Performance

THE WOOSTER SCHOOL
REVEREND JOHN D. VERDERY, HEADMASTER
DANBURY, CONNECTICUT

November 19, 1962

Dr. and Mrs. John O. L. Brown
1100 N.W. 61st Street
Miami, Florida

Dear Dr. and Mrs. Brown:

Enclosed please find mid-term reports for John and Bill.

In this, his last and academically most demanding and busiest year at Wooster, John has nevertheless managed this marking period to rank 1st not only in his class but in the entire school. His performance has been truly superb. He is a star in every aspect of Wooster School life.

Furthermore, the effect of John's record on Bill seems to be much more good than bad. I think that Bill does not suffer by comparison and is in fact quite proud and inspired by the work of his brother, which I am sure is a realization of your own highest hopes. Bill has a personality all his own, has a good deal of confidence, and has made a place for himself at Wooster entirely apart from his older brother. I am happy to say that I think there is no sign of any overshadowing in this situation.

Bill, as I am sure you know, does have quite a bit less ability than John and therefore is having great trouble in those courses where his past academic life hurts him; namely, mathematics and English. Where he has had a fresh start, as in beginning French and General Science, as you can see, he has done a superb job. It will not be easy for him to build a solid foundation in his English and his math, but he has been conscientious, and I am sure he will succeed.

The college choices for John include Yale, Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins, and Ursinus. Harvard is