

A TRIBUTE TO JOYCE A. HUGHES

Uzoamaka Emeka Nzelibe[†]

It is an honor to pay tribute to Professor Joyce A. Hughes. Professor Hughes has been described as a pioneer and trailblazer. Her fifty-plus-year career is notable for its many firsts: the first Black woman to receive a law degree from the University of Minnesota, the first woman and the first Black lawyer to clerk for a federal judge in Minnesota, the first woman and the first Black person to hold a tenure-track position at the University of Minnesota Law School, and the first Black woman to receive tenure in any department at Northwestern University.¹

For Professor Hughes, being a trailblazer has meant defying expectations, forging new paths, and remaining resolute in the face of racism and gender discrimination. Her career embodies the civil rights song “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around.”² Professor Hughes’s determination to have a seat at the table has enabled countless Black women to imagine themselves in positions unimaginable for Black women not so long ago.

Professor Hughes would be the first to tell you that she stands on the shoulders of other pioneering Black female legal educators, including Lutie A. Lytle, the first female law instructor in the United States, and Sybil Marie Jones Dedmond, the first Black woman to achieve tenure at an American law school.³ Professor Dedmond taught at North Carolina Central University, a predominantly Black institution, and graduated from the University of Chicago Law School.⁴ A tribute to Professor Hughes would be incomplete without also mentioning these pioneering Black women educators.

[†] Clinical Professor of Law and Director of the Seigle Clinic for Immigrant Youth and Families, Northwestern Pritzker School of Law.

¹ See generally Joyce A. Hughes, *Black and Female in Law*, 5 RUTGERS RACE & L. REV. 105 (2003) [hereinafter Hughes, *Black and Female in Law*].

² *Pioneering Law Professor Joyce Hughes*, LADIES LEADING (May 4, 2022), <https://ladiesleading.net/podcast/ingerburnett-kgxne-tpnge-jntm6-kma4d-lk8db> [https://perma.cc/ET28-VR6T]. This song became a civil rights anthem whose lyrics embody the perseverance and fortitude of those who, like Professor Hughes, fought to have their personhood respected.

³ Joyce Anne Hughes, *Neither a Whisper nor a Shout*, in REBELS IN LAW: VOICES IN HISTORY OF BLACK WOMEN LAWYERS 90, 90–101 (J. Clay Smith Jr. ed., 1998) [hereinafter Hughes, *Neither a Whisper nor a Shout*].

⁴ *Id.*; see also *Obit for Sybil Dedmond '50, First African-American Woman to Attain Tenure at American Law School*, UNIV. OF CHI.: THE L. SCH., <https://www.law.uchicago.edu/news/obit-sybil>

Like other trailblazers, Professor Hughes did not set out to make history. She credits her parents' no-nonsense attitude and focus on excellence for her success. Her father, Solomon Hughes Sr., was a professional golfer, and her mother, Bessie Mae Hughes, was a teacher. Professor Hughes and her older sister, Antoinette Hughes, were born in the segregated South—just like their parents. When Professor Hughes was around three, her father moved the family north to Minnesota to provide his children with more opportunities. Her parents would have two more children in Minnesota: Shirley Hughes and Solomon Hughes Jr.⁵ Professor Hughes says her father gave her wings, and her mother gave her roots.⁶ She would need both gifts to forge a path and survive as a Black woman lawyer and legal academic.

In 1962, Professor Hughes started at the University of Minnesota Law School after graduating magna cum laude from Carleton College and attending the University of Madrid as a Fulbright Scholar.⁷ Three years later, in 1965, she became the first Black woman to graduate from the University of Minnesota Law School.⁸ Professor Hughes excelled in law school. She graduated cum laude, was inducted into the Order of the Coif, and was a member of the *Minnesota Law Review*.⁹

Given her accomplishments, Professor Hughes should have received multiple offers from top law firms in Minnesota and around the country. Instead, her credentials were scrutinized because of her race and gender. Professor Hughes recalls interviewing with a majority-white law firm in Minnesota after graduation.¹⁰ Unlike her white male counterparts, the firm interviewed her over the course of three days rather than the usual two hours. The firm eventually offered her an associate position.¹¹ Even then, Professor Hughes seemed to know her worth: she turned down the firm's offer, choosing instead to work for a law firm specializing in municipal law.¹²

dedmond-50-first-african-american-woman-attain-tenure-american-law-school [https://perma.cc/T284-62VK].

⁵ Hughes, *Black and Female in Law*, *supra* note 1, at 105.

⁶ See generally Julieanna L. Richardson, *Joyce Hughes*, THE HISTORYMAKERS (Aug. 30, 2001), <https://da.thehistorymakers.org/storiesForBio;ID=A2001.027> [https://perma.cc/9KVK-JFYS].

⁷ See Curriculum Vitae, Joyce A. Hughes, Professor of L. Emerita, Northwestern Pritzker Sch. of L. (2021), https://www6.law.northwestern.edu/webfiles/faculty/assets/documents/cv-HughesJoyceA_v2021-12-10;110721.pdf [https://perma.cc/LU7P-V737].

⁸ Hughes, *Black and Female in Law*, *supra* note 1, at 109.

⁹ Curriculum Vitae, Joyce A. Hughes, *supra* note 7.

¹⁰ Hughes, *Black and Female in Law*, *supra* note 1, at 111.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

In 1971, Professor Hughes joined the University of Minnesota Law School faculty. While there, she encountered numerous barriers that tested her resolve to continue as a legal academic.¹³

Professor Hughes left Minnesota and took a position as a visiting professor at Northwestern University Law School in 1975. Northwestern Law had two Black male professors and a Black male associate dean when she started, and she credits these Black men for her easier transition to law teaching at Northwestern.¹⁴ Professor Hughes attained tenure at Northwestern in 1979, becoming the first Black woman to be tenured in any department at Northwestern University.¹⁵

During her time at Northwestern, Professor Hughes has published articles on topics as varied as affirmative action, asylum law, and branch banking. Most recently, in 2020, she wrote about the U.S. government's revocation of Muhammed Ali's passport after his conviction for draft evasion.¹⁶ Professor Hughes has taught several courses at Northwestern Law, including a survey course on immigration law and a seminar on refugee and asylum law. She has served on various boards, commissions, and councils and has received numerous awards recognizing her contributions to the profession.

By any measure, Professor Hughes has had an accomplished and remarkable career. Nevertheless, what stands out most to Professor Hughes about her time at Northwestern has been her relationships with Black students, especially Black female students. Professor Hughes's presence behind the podium affirmed for these students that they, too, belonged at Northwestern Law and served as a model for what they could achieve with a law degree.

In 2020, I was asked to take over Professor Hughes's seminar on refugee and asylum law when she unexpectedly became ill at the start of the fall semester. Students had signed up for the course expecting Professor Hughes to teach it, and I knew I had big shoes to fill. From her decision to include readings exploring racial discrimination as a basis for asylum to her footnote discussing the origins of Tupac Shakur's name in a hypothetical about the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement in Peru and the limits of political persecution, Professor Hughes unapologetically brought her own

¹³ Hughes, *Neither a Whisper nor a Shout*, *supra* note 3.

¹⁴ See Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, *#NLaw Proud: Professor Joyce A. Hughes*, YOUTUBE (Feb. 19, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQAFivsYL4I> [<https://perma.cc/2JY5-YGE7>].

¹⁵ Curriculum Vitae, Joyce A. Hughes, *supra* note 7.

¹⁶ *Id.*; see Joyce A. Hughes, *Muhammed Ali: The Passport Issue*, 42 N.C. L. REV. 167 (2020).

experiences to bear on her teaching. After her illness in the fall of 2020, Professor Hughes never returned to teaching and retired with emerita status in 2021 after forty-six years at Northwestern Law.

While there is much to celebrate about Professor Hughes's remarkable career, her career also serves as a reminder of how far the legal profession still needs to go to be more diverse and inclusive. In 1966, when Professor Hughes was about a year into her legal career, Lena Smith, Minnesota's first—and only—Black female lawyer passed away.¹⁷ Professor Hughes likely became the only Black female lawyer in Minnesota at the time, a lonely and unenviable position to hold at age twenty-six.¹⁸ That America has changed—but not by much for Black lawyers today. Although the numbers of women and non-Black minority lawyers have steadily increased over the past several years, the number of Black lawyers has remained stagnant, hovering at just below 5% of all lawyers since at least 2010.¹⁹ Consequently, a celebration of Professor Hughes's career must also be a call to action to do more to ensure a broader pool of Black candidates for all types of law careers.

Professor Hughes has inspired countless Black women and people of color to dream big and pursue those dreams resolutely. Her enduring presence at Northwestern Law is an accomplishment worth commemorating by the *Northwestern University Law Review*, and her legacy at this institution is a victory for Black women everywhere.

¹⁷ Hughes, *Black and Female in Law*, *supra* note 1, at 105.

¹⁸ *See id.* at 113 n.33 (noting that the 1970 census did not acknowledge any Black female lawyers practicing in Minnesota).

¹⁹ ABA, PROFILE OF THE LEGAL PROFESSION 33 (2020), <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/news/2020/07/potlp2020.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/37ZG-5CS6>].