

Carol Greenhouse  
Praying for Justice

## Preface

A major **finding** of empirical **studies** of the use of law in the last decade is that, in spite of a **popular image** of the United States as a litigious society, **Americans seem** to prefer avoidance to other **modes** of dispute resolution. **This book attempts** to contribute to that body of scholarship by examining the premises and quality of avoidance in a community and cultural context. The place is "**Hopewell**,"\* Georgia, a **white, moderately affluent, newly suburban** town, where family, work, and religion form the core of people's concerns.

I went to Hopewell in September 1973 to study dispute settlement in an **American community**, and my assumption, or hope, was that the role of the court in the social fabric of a town would be thrown into relief if the community was in the process of change. The rest of the book should make it clear why such a legal study was not possible in **this community** and also how it is that one can begin a study of an **American community** by looking for conflict and end by considering questions of a **person's relationship to God**. The following discussion **briefly outlines** the nature of the field work that led, in circuitous ways, to **this book**.

I chose Hopewell for a variety of reasons that might interest others who **plan** to study **American communities**. Primary among them was the fact that it was a county seat **with its own court**. Some courts of the **same level** (superior and inferior state courts) have

\*All names of the local persons and places that formed the community in this study are fictitious.

jurisdiction over more than one county in Georgia; the fact that "Hopewell County" was a single jurisdiction would facilitate follow-up and record searches. Secondary was Hopewell's proximity to Atlanta, which is the site of state and federal courts; my thought was that I would be able to follow disputes up and out of the judicial ladder. The concentration of relevant records at the Hopewell courthouse did turn out to be extremely convenient, though not because I was tracking litigants. The proximity to the city became a dimension of the study in an entirely different sense than I anticipated then. My search for a field site took place at long distance, and my only resources were an atlas and the state register. Hopewell County looked promising as a dynamic and diverse community because it was represented as being "half green" and "half brown"—half rural and half industrial—and because the county and town were divided by a railroad track. Later, before I began the field work proper, I visited the town on a detour from another errand in the area and what I saw confirmed my sense of the town as a feasible place to undertake ethnographic work.

By the time I settled in Hopewell, I had been in contact with the Historical Society, whose existence I guessed at and whose response to my interest in the town's current history was gracious and generous. The group offered me hospitality, work space, and a task: reviewing and completing genealogical records of important townspeople. The experience of working with genealogies was extremely rewarding. The first stage of the research was with those records and, coincidentally, with the other people at the commercial office that doubled as the society's headquarters. On days when I was not involved there, I perused court dockets and surveyed other records held by the court clerk's office. These are public records and readily available.

Meanwhile, I was getting to know my neighbors at the apartment complex I had chosen as a place to live. It was a fortuitous choice, since it was a "respectable" place whose tenants were "like" me: single "career girls" in their early twenties. (The quotation marks indicate local speech.) One woman in particular became a good friend, and as an act of friendship she introduced me to her friends, who were the core of the "college and career group" at the Baptist church. (Voluntary activities at the church are age-graded; this group was eighteen and over—by no means all college students—

and single.) I am not a Baptist but welcomed their invitations to join them at church as a gesture of inclusion and as a chance to sample the town's social life. I did attend the church as a guest. At that point, I thought of my work with the Historical Society and at the courthouse as my study and participated in the evenings with my neighbor's friends as a somewhat peripheral social activity. I soon realized that my real study was there at the church, that what I wanted to know about conflict and courts and the law in general was being answered in sermons, in prayer, and in a growing number of conversations. I was not prepared for this turn of events because I was already involved with the church on a different basis. I had friends there, and as a way of acknowledging their generosity in what I hoped would be a nonreligious, inconspicuous, but meaningful role, I joined the church choir.

I was "caught"—to borrow Favret-Saada's (1981) term—long before I knew it. I later learned that singing is considered a ministry among Baptists and, as I hope the text makes clear, that friendship and witnessing are inseparable. A Baptist "witnesses" for Jesus by introducing a non-Baptist, or lapsed Baptist, to the idea of salvation. Witnessing involves no urging or importuning but rather an explication of what Jesus has accomplished in the believer's life. It is an invitation by way of autobiography, and I found these invitations—when I realized what they were—challenging, respectful, and loving. To a believer, witnessing is a gift. To a nonbeliever, it is many privileged conversations, which I hope I have not dishonored in this book. The implicit invitation of the witness is mirrored in the explicit invitation during the Baptist church service. The hymn of invitation accompanies a prayerful moment when "prospects," as they are called, become the objects of prayer. When a prospect decides that he has been visited by the Holy Spirit and wishes to signal his acceptance of Jesus, he walks down the aisle of the church to the altar to give his pledge to the minister and rejoicing congregation. I know that many people expected me to take this step, which I could not; my steady presence at the church seemed to suggest that I was engaged in an unusually long ("thoughtful," my friends later said) struggle with the Holy Spirit. I never did join the church, although I believed the minister when he told me that if I did, there would be an "instant revival." "A thousand people would follow you to the altar," he said.

Seven months of intense involvement at the church were punctuated at intervals by interviews on the subjects of Christianity and conversion. "Interview" somewhat misstates the case, since the inquiry was in both directions. Many members of the church, but particularly the minister, were generous with their time and patience. I was anxious not to deceive, but I also knew that my questioning might be taken as a sign of my "conviction" (wrestling with the Holy Spirit). I cannot recall ever asking a question that was not fully answered, and I did not have to ask many: people were so glad to discuss their faith and their discovery of it that, as word of my interest spread, people sought me out. I was moved by their confidences, which were offered selflessly, and this book represents my effort to accept and understand them.

Once I understood that my continued presence at the church was being interpreted as a prolonged spiritual crisis by those who knew me or knew of me, I decided that I could no longer participate in church activities. I knew that I had become troubling, and I feared becoming an affront. Although my friends assured me that they saw my delay as being due to my desire to be convinced intellectually, I also knew that my failure to join the church had by itself caused tears and doubt among people I cared about. At that point, I turned my attention back to the courts and to the development of the county and finally moved to the city in late 1974. I commuted to Hopewell for social visits, interviews, and archival research through the fall of 1975. I did not return until the fall of 1980, when I collected the data reported in Chapters 4 and 5.

Apart from originating in activities in and around the church, the court, and the Historical Society, which I have already described, my data come from countless conversations that were largely unplanned. Since my "job" left me as free as the unemployed housewives I came to know, many mornings or afternoons were spent touring sites around the county, at work with other women on craft projects (a local passion), or just in conversation over coffee or Coca-Cola (another passion). The book has acquired its bias toward women's words in this way. Relationships between men and women or, from my perspective, men and unmarried women were formal and impersonal by comparison. My sense of men's lives comes partly from their wives and sisters. I knew some, of course, and talked with them—most extensively with my own "peers" (age-

mates) at the church. I also heard men pray, read news of them in the papers, and witnessed their separate lives at the courthouse or simply in stores and on the street. I rarely carried a note pad but kept a journal in which I recorded daily events and scenes and, when I thought I knew enough, wrote biographical essays describing to myself individuals whose stories seemed especially vivid or salient. These records along with files full of news clippings, church programs, and other mementoes form the basis of what follows.

In their explanations of how society functions, the people of Hopewell have much to say about the law; most Americans do not use the courts to process their personal complaints, so the widespread lack of experience with the courts in Hopewell is not surprising or especially significant. As the text makes clear, however, the people who manage to avoid the courts in Hopewell fall into two categories. Baptists form one of them, in that they avoid not only the courts but also the adversarial concepts of conflict and remedy that the law entails. The other category, which includes everyone else, expresses attitudes about conflict that are congenial to the law (that is, in adversarial terms, oriented toward remedial awards) but prefers to settle disputes out of court. I have written about these differences and their significance elsewhere (Greenhouse 1982a, 1982b, 1983, and 1986), but two points remain that might appear counterintuitive in the American context. First, it appears that law use in general and litigation in particular require a world view that is not universal among even affluent white Americans, such as the people in Hopewell are. At the very least, that world view must include both the legitimacy of the state's institutions and a sense that the human condition can be meaningfully changed by human action. The Baptists in Hopewell do not believe in the second of these things: the state merits our obedience, but only God can change the conditions of life, they say.

The second point is that the people of Hopewell demonstrate for us that rights are not larger than culture. The Baptists of Hopewell are not powerless by any stretch of the imagination, and their aversion to using the law in their interpersonal affairs appears to impose few measurable costs on them. I cannot accept the questions—which I have heard many times—that attempt to test the credibility of the Baptists' patience with hypothetical justiciable problems (What if someone were murdered? What if there were a

*Pre,*

major theft?). Such things did not happen while I was in Hopewell, and at any rate, Baptists there speak of the *need* for salvation precisely because they recognize that such temptations can occur. They do not pray to avoid such confrontations, but for strength in dealing with them. In writing about them, I cannot help exposing Hopewell's Baptists to such cynicism but no more so than their daily lives do. I would answer in return that if the Baptists in Hopewell do not endure much that others would consider hard, the rest of the world does not give us much assurance that greater pain than theirs enables people to overcome a view of society that defeats them long before they exercise the rights to which their law entitles them. Just as individualism is a promise and a burden, praying for justice is at once an act of faith and despair.

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## A Note to Readers in Hopewell

One of the realities of anthropological writing in the current age is the presence of a very special audience of readers: the ones whose lives form the subject of the research. Although every anthropologist welcomes the participation of "informants" as collaborators during the months or years of field work, few would honestly say they relish the scrutiny of their former hosts when it comes to the finished text. In our books and monographs, we prove ourselves to have been very bad guests, or so it would seem. When I began my work in the town I call Hopewell, I promised you, my hosts, a copy of whatever book might come from my labors there, and this is it. Here I want to explain the connection between the things you showed me and the things I have written about, so that if you do not like the book, at least you will know that its source is the same respect and affection that I hope were evident in my regard for you when I lived in Hopewell.

I am sure that you will not like the book, not least because if you did, it would be the first recorded instance in the United States of a population appreciating the anthropology visited upon it. Americans do not seem to like being written about for the most part, and they do not like being analyzed at all. J. P. Marquand's novel *Point of No Return* captures the aching sense of personal violation that is the consequence of an anthropologist's field research in a New England town. The ambiguity of the analyst/confidante's role has devastating consequences in that book's plot. In this book, I have tried to avoid committing that kind of harm by writing not so much

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about your lives but about the people you told me about and especially the *way* you told me about them. The book is about love, faith, remorse, and hope. My hope is that no single person will recognize himself or herself here. Those of you with whom I spent the most time will not find yourselves portrayed on the following pages, although you may recognize the sound of your own voices. I did not consider that I had the right to single out individuals for description or analysis, when all of the people I knew presented themselves to me as ordinary, even typical.

As the introduction explains, this book is the product of a long series of conversations. These conversations were a privilege and a pleasure, and I have tried to preserve their integrity by writing about their whole sense, not dissolving them into bits of information to be reshuffled like so many cards. The mood of an evening's talk or the flow of a morning's conversation—these were among the things that enter into the analysis on the following pages, along with the things that we talked about or did not talk about. I hope you will understand that if I have written about these conversations, it is not because I stand in judgment of my interlocutors but because these conversations made me want to write. I suspect that this will be another source of your displeasure with this book: it includes so many things that were never quite put into words and, so you may feel, never should be. In particular, you may feel that conflict, which is central among the themes of this book, should not be given air and a voice.

So let me say this: this book is not about *conflicts*; it does not pick and probe at the relationships among people—relationships that, in any case, seemed more like art than sociology. It is about conflict in that the more I listened in Hopewell and the more I read, the more I understood what I took to be your feeling that social life should have a certain grace. For many of you, the grace is God's; for all of you, the grace is southern. What was special in my experience with you was the way you opened doors of hospitality and friendship, the way you taught newcomers to belong by treating them as if they already belonged, and the way you believed in Hopewell's future. There is much more—or much else. Ordinarily, these things, which when added together we might call the "quality of life," do not have to be put into words. But anthropology is not ordinary. Its hungry pen wants to put things into words so that as we struggle to

imagine all the forms of human experience on earth, we can imagine them for their own specialness, not just as a sequence of comings and goings, of "doings." My hope is that readers of this book will learn something of your way of life, since I believe deeply that you have something to teach them about the American soul.

I have not yet said what grace has to do with conflict. My sense is that, for you, being a lady or a gentleman has to do with (among other things) letting the awkward moments pass and letting the bright moments shine. In the Baptist church, I learned the same message in a different way: being Christian means focusing on God's will, not one's own, and on letting one's own soul reflect the bright light of faith, not the dim light of self-vaunting. My own way of putting this—and hence to say in this book—is that men and women find it important to learn to live together by setting their self-interest and anger aside. This is the point where the book begins. It ends by suggesting that this idea—about grace, or faith, or the silencing of conflict—has a history. I have had to reopen that history in a way that will sound unfamiliar to you, to make the point to readers that your own ethic is a powerful one.

Whatever else it is, this book is a testimony to my debt to you. I have tried to discharge that debt in a number of ways in the text itself. Primary among them is my commitment to protecting your privacy, both from the world beyond Hopewell and within Hopewell. First, there are no maps or illustrations, and I have changed the names of your town and county and of every person I cite from there. Some local citizens have published books about Hopewell, and I have quoted them without giving them credit (I do use quotation marks but no names or book titles), so that they do not give the game away. The history I have written is as accurate as I know it, but I have written it in a way that makes your town indistinguishable from a handful or two of others in the region. I have written about the novel that was written about your town (actually, there were several), but I have left it to you to give out its author and title, if you prefer. My goal was to make it possible for any one of you to deny successfully that this book is about your town. That way, we can all be *sure* that no one will take my word over yours about anything that matters to you.

Another part of my debt is reflected in the decisions I have made about the directions this book takes. You often wondered what

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anthropologists do; **this** is a **sample**. I **have decided not** to present your town as some **quaint** backwater (it is not), **with** a past **but** no future. In the years I **have** known your town, it has grown beyond **what I could have** imagined in 1973. I lament the loss of **some** of your exotic scenery (**there** is **nothing** like it in upstate New York), but I am glad for you **that** the malls and subdivisions have **brought** Hopewell so **much** capital and energy. This leads **me** to **my** next point: I have decided to present your town as part of **the** process of current **American history**. Finally, I have written about **your** town in **the** language of **anthropology**, so **that** as we ponder **the nature** of social **and** cultural life, we can **have your** witness at **hand** as one testimony of the **shape** Western civilization has taken in our modern era.

One of my fears is **that you will think that I have written about Hopewell because** it is **odd, unique, or flawed. This is not the case. Hopewell** is, to me, as unique as a **familiar** face, but I am **able** to write **about the town** as an anthropologist precisely **because** of its parallels, on **innumerable** points, to other **American communities and other human communities. Some** of these **points** of comparison are **mentioned and discussed** in **the** footnotes to **each chapter**. By **becoming the subject** of a work of **anthropology**, a **community does not become a laboratory animal** strapped to **the table but—far different—a companion in the mind, an unseen teacher. This would be the** place to write at **length about** what anthropology is **and how its long** tradition of **field** work has developed **throughout the century—this would be the** place if **this were that kind of book. Because** it is not, I will end **this note to you** by **offering all readers** in **Hopewell** a suggestion **that** will reveal **me to be the pedant** you may **have** suspected I am: **if you** read this book, please read at least one other volume of anthropology—then you will taste for yourselves **the comparative questions** about social life **that brought** me to your doorsteps.

C. G.