'Look out the window, Dad,' our six-year-old daughter Yogi said to me as our Continental jet prepared to land at the Honolulu International Airport around midnight on 1 August 1983. Looking at the multicoloured lights down below, she exclaimed: 'It's like a thief has spilled jewels all over the place!' It was a beautiful description of Honolulu from the air at night. But I was preoccupied with other thoughts.

This was my first visit to the United States, to take up a tenure-track position in Pacific Islands history at the University of Hawai‘i. I had attempted, unsuccessfully, to come to the University of Hawai‘i before. In 1973, after completing my undergraduate degree at the University of the South Pacific, I had applied to pursue graduate studies in history in Hawai‘i. The History Department, which I was now joining as a faculty member, had refused to accept me even as a lowly Teaching Assistant in its World Civilizations Program, despite the recommendation of one of its own most distinguished members, Walter Johnson (formerly chairman of the History Department at the
moved to Canberra. My wife had no difficulty obtaining an appropriate visa to work in a senior research position in her field of environmental economics. And I enjoyed the opportunity to work in a fine university with an established reputation for excellence in research in the field of Pacific studies. We thus killed several birds with one stone, and decided to live and work in Australia.

After nearly a decade in Hawai‘i, writing this just two weeks before my scheduled departure (I returned for a semester to complete my obligations to the University), I leave the islands with mixed feelings. I wish I could say that the University of Hawai‘i will become a truly international institution in the composition of its faculty and in the quality of the programs it offers in many areas. Its distance from major centres of learning, the prohibitive cost of living in Honolulu, and a certain parochial island mentality are all factors that will prove detrimental to the University in the long run. There are, of course, some exceptions. The University's Center for Pacific Islands Studies, of which I have been privileged to be a member, has an established international reputation for the quality of its scholarly publications. And the Pacific Collection of the Hamilton Library, built up over the years by the untiring efforts of Rene Heyum, and now in the equally capable hands of Heyum's successor, Karen Peacock, is quite simply the best collection of its type in the world. These, and other such islands of excellence, need to be carefully maintained if the University of Hawai‘i is to make its mark in the wider world of scholarship.

I have had to readjust social and mental compasses since returning to Canberra, just as I had to do when I landed in Honolulu. I had to refamiliarise myself with cars being driven 'on the wrong side'. And I had to re-learn the social and academic conventions with which I once was intimately familiar. Perhaps I no longer am. Things change, even — or especially — for historians.
University of Chicago). Walter had taught a course in recent American history for a semester in Fiji and, pleased with my performance, had encouraged me to come to Hawai‘i.

Fortunately for me, this minor setback turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Soon afterwards, I received a full graduate fellowship to do my Master’s degree at the University of British Columbia. The reason for the rejection of my application for graduate work, I was later to find out, was that I had only a three-year Bachelor’s degree, while the normal undergraduate degree in the United States was four years. I had made matters worse for myself by taking overloads and completing my undergraduate course in two and a half years. On top of it all, no one had heard of the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. A university in Fiji? What was the language of instruction? Were classes conducted in grass huts? Was the faculty any good? Isn’t there something strange about a three-year degree? So I had fallen victim to North American ignorance of an Anglo-Australasian system of education south of the equator.

I was neither the first nor the last to suffer from the ignorance of Hawai‘i’s academic administrators. Sometimes, the results could be hilarious. One example illustrates this well. All foreign students admitted to the University of Hawai‘i are required to pass the TOEFL examination (Test of English as a Foreign Language). When an English student applied for admission to the graduate program, he was asked to take the TOEFL. At first, he thought this was a joke and refused. After all, English was his mother tongue. But rules were rules, the bureaucrats said: all foreign students had to take the TOEFL. In the end, a compromise of sorts was reached. The exam was waived, but only after the Englishman demonstrated mastery of his mother tongue to the satisfaction of the authorities.

Ten years after my initial unsuccessful application, I was on firmer ground, having secured a PhD at the Australian National University and having taught for a couple of years at my alma mater, the University of the South Pacific. In 1983, I resigned from there to
take the Hawai‘i offer, the resignation coming after the University declined my request for a year’s leave without pay so that I could gain the experience of teaching at another university. Needless to say, I was very anxious and worried, having burned my bridges in Fiji. Thus I had no alternative but to make a success of myself in the new, alien environment. What if I failed? That thought was too terrible to contemplate.

A mixture of motives, ranging from frustration to a desire for adventure, impelled me to leave my country and my alma mater. I had returned to USP from Australia. I had received a couple of offers for junior teaching positions in that country and a postdoctoral fellowship in New Zealand but had turned them down. I had dreams and an exaggerated, in retrospect embarrassingly naive, belief that I could make a difference. In 1981, I was only the second Fiji national in possession of a doctorate degree in history. I began my academic career as a Junior Lecturer at the bottom of the hierarchy. Within a very short time, I began to feel disillusioned. There was little creative sustenance and stimulation. Intellectually, USP seemed to be a cul-de-sac.

The problem caused by the intellectual shallowness of the university environment was compounded by many others. For me, one of the most acute was the demands made upon my time and resources to contribute to social and political projects in the wider community. As one of the few ‘doctored’ locals at USP, I was frequently invited to give high school graduation speeches, address a variety of community gatherings, and proffer advice on matters that I knew nothing about. (Do you think my son should do Accounting or Economics? Do you think we should plant a tree to commemorate this event or construct a bus shelter? How about a talk on ‘Fiji in the Year 2000?’ Could you arrange for my son to be enrolled in the Foundation pre-degree program?)

I did the best I could to fulfill my social obligations, and I can’t deny the private satisfaction of seeing my name appear in the local papers once in a while, or from the occasional invitations I received
from Suva's flourishing cocktail circuit. Life was comfortable and, with proper care and attention, I could, perhaps in a few years' time, secure a small niche for myself as a minor local celebrity. At the university, I served on important committees, giving out research grants, refereeing papers for the local scholarly journal, making decisions about personnel. I had even managed to rise to the rank of Assistant to the Head of the School of Social and Economic Development. A prominent career up the academic administrative ladder seemed assured, if only I was patient enough.

Yet these accomplishments, such as they were, gave little inner emotional or intellectual satisfaction. Having spent three intensive years writing a dissertation under the supervision of first-rate scholars at a first-rate university, I knew that I was not really doing serious scholarship at USP. I was spending too much of my time on projects that would ultimately be meaningless. My ego was involved as well. The terrible 'fear of extinction and insignificance' that V.S. Naipaul has written about regarding his own childhood in Trinidad, which he had to escape to find himself, the feeling that one should do something enduring and useful with one's talents, began to haunt me more and more. I felt that I had to 'prove' myself in a more demanding intellectual environment. And I should make the move before it was too late. What could be more demanding than a stint of teaching at the University of Hawai'i? I know that mainland Americans would barely be able to suppress a wry smile at the thought that Hawai'i has a demanding intellectual environment, but I was coming from a small ex-British colony, which attained political independence only in 1970, after 96 years of colonial rule; a place where, until the 1960s, the highest job local people could aspire to was junior-to-middle ranking positions in the colonial civil service. And that, too, after a great deal of grovelling and greasing of appropriate palms.

At first, everything about Hawai'i was different, even strange. Nothing, not even five years of living in Canada and Australia, had
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prepared me and my young family for what we encountered there. People drove on the wrong side of the road! That got us into trouble on several occasions as we looked in the wrong direction while crossing the road. We were surrounded by strange accents, sights and smells. After Australia, the American beer was terrible. The traffic jams, the double-lane highway, the tall skyline of Waikiki: one could easily forget that Honolulu was located on a small island. We did not know a single soul in Honolulu. We were complete strangers in a strange place, unfamiliar with the lay of the city and cooped up in the impersonal, sparsely furnished ambience of faculty housing. We learned to adjust our mental and social compasses very quickly, but it was not easy. It never is in a foreign country.

I went to the History Department a day after arriving in Honolulu, and I have vivid memories of that occasion. The chairman, Harry Lamley, a mild-mannered and very gentle historian of China, introduced me to my other colleagues as the Department's newest 'professor'. I found the sound of my exalted title startling. The Anglo-Australasian system, in which I was trained, is still very feudal. A department usually has one professor, a kind of constitutional monarch, who is the most senior member of it, while other members congregate at the low-to-middle ranks of the hierarchy. To attain the rank of professor is to reach the pinnacle of one's career ladder, and only a tiny proportion of the faculty ever do. The title took some getting used to, but I now think that it is an entirely fair description of one's job. A professor is one who professes a discipline or subject, and should be so addressed. Why should a department have only one or two professors? The principle that anyone with ability and accomplishment, measured in terms of one's teaching performance and the quality of research output, can reach the top of his or her career ladder is one that I find personally appealing. The attainment of a professorship should not be a privilege of an exclusive club of a few grey-haired, administratively adroit men, but the right of anyone who meets the necessary qualifications.
I was also staggered by the size of the Department. There were well over 30 full-time members of it, making the History Department one of the largest on the Manoa campus. I was surprised because history departments in my part of the world tend to be much smaller: my own former department at USP had only three historians. The leap from three to thirty was quite a big one, and this too took some getting used to: it took me about a year to learn the names of all my colleagues. So also did the formality of protocol. From where I came, and even in Australia and New Zealand, there was a certain egalitarian social ethos that usually did away with the formality of addressing one by one’s title. Academic and non-academic staff usually addressed each other by their first names. Not so in Hawai’i, or at least not in my department. After nearly a decade of teaching in the History Department, all the secretaries still addressed me by my title. This was surprising as I had always imagined the American environment to be more relaxed and informal. Still, my colleagues remind me that the degree of formality in Hawai’i is nothing compared to what exists in parts of mainland America, let alone the still more feudal European scene.

There were other surprises as well. When I was appointed, I was told that I would teach the Department’s bread-and-butter World Civilizations course as well as graduate courses and seminars in my own specialty, Pacific Islands history. It was only when I began to prepare myself for my courses that I realised the enormity of the task ahead of me. I realised that nothing in my background and training had prepared me for the task at hand. I had taken a few basic survey courses in Western history and had taught a freshman course called Contemporary History, but the World Civilizations course I was to teach required a much deeper grounding in the subject than I had ever had. When I was told that I might expect more than 300 freshmen in my class, most of whom had never done history, and had even less interest in the subject, and that my performance in the course would be an important factor in my contract renewal, I nearly panicked. Yes, I had wanted to test my talents in a more demanding
environment, but this was going to be torture. And there was no escape.

A quick perusal of the Department's guidelines informed me of the general scope of the course. The course was expected to concentrate on the development and distinctive features of all the world's major civilisations; provide a sense of historical development on a global scale, emphasising the enduring influence of traditional civilisations and the dynamics of modern world history; focus on such global themes as agricultural and urban revolutions, emergence and growth of civilisations, and such topics as imperialism, decolonisation and industrialisation; and, in the end, create a context of understanding of the contemporary human experience. In this regard, the instructor was to 'emphasize the varieties of the human experience' and 'encourage sympathetic understanding of the foreign', and 'prepare students to draw upon the collective human experience in their efforts to understand the contemporary world'.

Altogether a very tall and daunting order, especially for one completely new to the field. The course was divided into two parts and taught over a year. The first part, World Civilizations 151, covered the pre-modern world, from antiquity to around 1500 AD, and the second part, 152, dealt with the period since then to the present. The first year I taught the course was simply an exercise in endurance, and I considered myself lucky to be a lecture or two ahead of my students. Topics with which I was completely unfamiliar had to be covered at breakneck speed: the early beginnings of human society, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Roman, Greek and Hellenistic civilisations, Harrapa and Mohenjadaro and the Maurayan Empire, the Han period and Confucius. The next semester was equally fast-paced: Renaissance and Reformation, the intellectual, political, economic and scientific revolutions of Europe, the voyages of discovery and the creation of colonial empires, the emergence of modern China, India and Japan, the political and military conflicts of the twentieth century. Not only had I to master the material but also to present it
confidently to a largely uninterested audience. Uppermost in my mind was the need to keep my students interested and engaged, not always an easy task, especially at 8.30 in the morning!

In the beginning, I viewed my assignment in the World Civ Program as a limited suspended sentence, which I would serve out in a few years’ time. That was how I was informally advised by my colleagues to approach my task. If there was no rioting in the course, no major complaints, I’d be fine. In any case, no one really took undergraduate course evaluations seriously (except when wanting to get rid of a bad departmental citizen). That reassured me somewhat. But as time went on, my attitude changed. I became intellectually committed to the Program as I began to realise its important place in a broad-based humanities curriculum. I was converted. Commitment was one thing, however, and the resources with which to carry it out quite another. I found the textbooks to be inadequate and deeply Eurocentric. Very often, what passed for world history was actually the history of European thought, values and institutions, with little in-depth coverage of non-European civilisations, giving the impression that everything worthwhile in modern life originated in Western Europe. African and pre-Columbian American civilisations received a passing mention, but there was nothing at all on the accomplishments of the societies of Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. If my Island region was mentioned at all, it was in the context of European ‘discoveries’ or the achievements of such explorers as Captain Cook or as the place where Europeans found Noble Savages.

This struck me as odd, especially in a place like Hawai‘i. The emphasis on European history may be appropriate, perhaps, at mainland US colleges with substantial Caucasian student populations. But in Hawai‘i, this emphasis tended to have a very negative, demoralising effect on students from the Islands. A local student expressed his frustrations to me this way: ‘Eh Brah, how come only the haole got history? How come we not in the history books?’ He had a point with which I, as someone born in the Pacific Islands,
sympathised. I was reminded of one of Henry Kissinger's statements about Micronesia in 1971: 'There are only 90,000 out there. Who gives a damn?'

To redress the balance between Western and non-Western societies, I decided to spend about half the course on the great movements of Europe and the other half on non-Western societies. This underwent further revision as students responded warmly to my experiment. Oceanic peoples found more and more space in the syllabus. When talking about the great European voyages of discovery, I also talked about the great navigational feats of the Polynesians. When talking about the achievements of Captain Cook, I also talked about the reasons why he died at Kealakekua Bay. And lectures on the origins of modern European colonialism would be accompanied by presentations on the cultural dispossession and physical destruction of the indigenous populations of Australia and the Americas. We talked about the causes of great migrations in modern human history, but we also found time to reflect on their social and environmental consequences. A lecture on the origins of the Cold War would be followed by consideration of the politics and processes of nuclear testing in the Pacific Islands. France was the centre of the Enlightenment, the promoter of the ideas of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, but it was also a colonial power in the Pacific Islands and tested nuclear devices there.

Purists might query my unorthodox approach, but my students appeared to appreciate my efforts to place the historical experience of the Islands in the broader context of human history. I found this redirection intellectually satisfying and stimulating. Moreover, I actually enjoyed the experience. It was quite ironic that someone who had once viewed teaching in the World Civ Program as a limited sentence, to be escaped from at the earliest possible opportunity, should be appointed the Director of it, and receive a nomination for a distinguished teaching award! There is no doubt in my own mind that I have become a better teacher as a result of the
World Civ Program. Among many things, I have learnt that one does not have to be solemn to be serious. I still remember with some puzzlement what one student wrote anonymously in his/her evaluation of the course some years ago: 'Professor Lal is like President Reagan. I am not saying he is telling lies, but he is so funny and persuasive!'

Teaching graduate courses and seminars in my own field was a wonderful experience, but here, too, there were many hurdles to overcome. In the Anglo-Australasian system, no course work is required for the PhD degree; it is earned entirely by a research thesis usually done under the supervision of a single scholar. One is, therefore, understandably selective in one's reading and quite narrowly focused. The sole aim of the doctoral exercise is to produce a competent and largely original piece of work that makes some 'contribution to knowledge'. This is at least theoretically different from the situation in the US where a student works with a committee, representing his/her field of interest, and the thesis itself is a part, albeit an important one, of the total graduate exercise. There is an additional problem. In Australia and New Zealand and the Islands, Pacific history is often interpreted to mean the history of the South Pacific. The historical experiences of the islands north of the equator are seldom featured in the reading lists, or only in a tangential fashion. For many students I encountered in Hawai'i, the opposite was often the case. They had a greater awareness of the history and culture of the islands of Micronesia and considerably less familiarity with the historical experience of islands in the South Pacific. Many of my graduate students were older than I, and some of them had lived in the Islands and were familiar with their histories. I therefore had to work twice as hard to acquaint myself with the broader field. The experience of teaching at the University of Hawai'i has thus broadened my horizons and increased my understanding of Pacific Islands history in ways that I am sure would not have occurred had I remained south of the equator.
I have often been asked, by my colleagues both at Hawai‘i and elsewhere, of my impressions of the quality of graduate students during my eight years there. They expect a pessimistic, even a negative response. Without doubt, the very best students that I taught in Hawai‘i would compare favourably with the best students anywhere; the weaker ones would have difficulty getting admitted into graduate programs at most institutions. I told my senior graduate students that, in my seminars, they were making a transition from students to research scholars. Consequently, I fully expected them to make original contributions in their research papers. I suspect that some of them found my high expectations somewhat startling at first, but they responded warmly when they realised that I took them seriously. The quality of their work showed in the fact that papers submitted for my seminars regularly won international as well as local awards for excellence, and have been published.

It will be clear by now that there are many aspects of American academia I admire very much. Perhaps what I most like about it is its democratic environment. There is an element of openness that I particularly appreciate. Productivity does not go unrewarded. A productive scholar and good teacher can rise to the top of his/her profession. Good teaching is emphasised and course evaluations by students are taken into account, but it is my impression that, in the final analysis, it is the quality and output of research that really count. This is the case elsewhere as well, but I believe that, at least at some Commonwealth universities with which I am familiar, teaching undergraduate classes is given greater weight and recognition than at Hawai‘i. Another appealing aspect of teaching at the University of Hawai‘i was the freedom one enjoyed in devising and delivering one’s courses. No one required me to submit my course outlines and exam questions to the Head of Department for approval, as I was required to do in Fiji. Nor did I have to defend my grades before a Board of Studies at the end of the semester. I did not have to justify to anyone why, say, in an exceptionally bright class, a good number of students
Mr Tulsi's Store

received very high marks. In Hawai‘i, it seemed, students were presumed to be potential A-graders unless they proved themselves otherwise; in Fiji, it seemed the other way around. The difference in approach pointed starkly to the contrasts between an elitist and a democratic intellectual environment.

If I have a criticism of American academia as I experienced it at Hawai‘i, it is the absence of a sense of a community of scholars collectively engaged in the communal pursuit of scholarship. My own department was not a department in the conventional sense of the word, but rather a collection of individuals, each doing his or her own thing. Some of my colleagues were very accomplished and well known in their fields, but they never bothered to share the fruits of their research with their colleagues. In the eight years I was there, my department did not have a single seminar series for its faculty. This was (and is) in marked contrast to my experience elsewhere, where such things are a regular part of academic life. So one learnt about one’s colleagues’ accomplishments through newsletters or by word-of-mouth, but never in a scholarly seminar. I suppose part of the reason for this state of affairs lay in Hawai‘i’s isolation from the rest of the United States, with the result that my colleagues had their eyes firmly fixed on international conferences and professional gatherings on the mainland. Little was to be gained by performing on the local stage. A pity.

Another aspect of the American system which can lead to negative results is the emphasis on productivity. I have no quarrel with the requirement that scholars should publish regularly, but sometimes this leads to a tendency to publish just for the sake of publishing, just to score another point in the arithmetic of social science indices, to fatten the volume of one’s curriculum vitae. It encourages narrow specialism, a deeper and deeper burrowing into a narrow field, and sometimes sheer superficiality. An eminent historian in the department once said to me that all his knowledge of the Pacific Islands could easily be written down on one side of an envelope. I think he meant what he said. It probably didn’t occur to him that he
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was saying this on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and he had been living there since the mid-1960s! This attitude also indicated the importance that many in the Department attached to my field. A colleague once remarked to me, only half jokingly, that there couldn't be a field of Pacific Islands History: it was all either anthropology or politics. Another remarked that there was a lot of water between Hawai'i and the mainland of Asia. It was another version of Henry Kissinger's remark mentioned earlier. Had I remained based solely in the History Department, I would have found the limited vision of my colleagues problematic. Fortunately, I was also a member of the University's Center for Pacific Islands Studies, whose seminars, conferences and publications served as a link to the wider community of Pacific scholars and thus helped to alleviate my sense of isolation. My association with the Center was one of the highlights of my time in Hawai'i.

Three years after my appointment, I was tenured and promoted. I had published my books and articles in refereed journals; I had reviewed manuscripts for university presses, given papers at conferences and seminars, and taught my courses. In short, I had met all the criteria for tenure and promotion. I was on my way up: promotion to full professorship was just a matter of time. Yet, despite this success, I still felt vaguely unsatisfied. This was partly because of my own intellectual and political inclinations. I am not attracted to abstract, detached scholarship; I prefer sailing close to the wind, where scholarship and practical involvement interface. I have always been 'politically' engaged with subjects I have studied and written about, and I have taken a political stance, whether on the coups in Fiji or the anti-nuclear movements in the Pacific Islands. It was this, a sense of practical engagement, which I had once sought to escape, that I began missing in Honolulu. I observed and quietly supported the various peace demonstrations on campus, and even subscribed to some of the literature on Central and Latin America. I also observed the various sovereignty and indigenous rights movements in Hawai'i. But I could
be no more than an interested bystander in their activities. For me, sympathy did not, and could not, translate into passionate engagement.

I felt even more alienated in the aftermath of the coups in Fiji. The coups destroyed many assumptions and values that one had always taken for granted: freedom of speech and conscience, the value of political pluralism, rule of law and the sanctity of the ballot box. One's country was engulfed in a major conflagration of historic proportions, with profound implications for other Pacific Islands. Yet in Hawai'i, news and commentary about this most dramatic event in recent Pacific Islands' history were perfunctory. I gave a few seminars on the topic on the campus, wrote an article for one of the local newspapers, and eventually a book about it. These brought some emotional relief, but they also served to heighten my sense of alienation. My graduate students, with whom I discussed the topic in seminars, were adamant that what happened in Fiji was just and necessary, a struggle for indigenous rights against the political and economic dominance of an immigrant majority.

My effort to alert them to the complex underlying factors, which had more to do with the personal ambitions of defeated politicians, with intra-Fijian rivalries, than with race, failed to make any impact. It seemed to me that their minds were made up, influenced by their particular experience in Hawai'i (and some other parts of the Pacific such as New Zealand and Kanaky), and it was pointless for me to confuse them with facts. It was much later, when political developments in the aftermath of the coups substantially confirmed the broad thrust of my analysis, that they changed their position; but by then my cup of disillusionment with Hawai'i was nearly full.

There were other things that I realised I was missing in Honolulu after a year's sojourn in Australia in 1990: the familiar cultural and social landscapes and signposts of my childhood: the Commonwealth connection. Take sports, for instance. My colleagues in Hawai'i's History
Department were passionate about sports of all kinds: baseball, basketball, football, volleyball. Sport, not religion, is the opiate of the masses, even the educated ones. Names and deeds of sporting legends are mentioned in great detail. But the names of Babe Ruth and Joe Di Maggio and Abdul Kareem Jabbar meant little to me, for the sports they played were not what I grew up with. I grew up with football (called soccer in the United States) and learnt to love cricket and rugby. Viv Richards and the Chappell brothers, Pele and Franz Beckenbauer were my sport heroes, but their names meant little to my colleagues. World Cup soccer excited little passion, and no one knew anything about cricket Test Matches. One colleague thought that cricket was a primitive form of baseball for the indolent upper classes of England. He didn’t know of the passion that cricket excites in the West Indies! One kept in touch with these things vicariously through letters from friends south of the equator. A year in Australia accentuated my sense of loss of things I began to cherish much more after the troubled recent history of my country.

Coinciding with, and contributing to, my increasing disillusionment with life in Hawai'i was my and my family’s tiresome battle with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) about visas. From the very beginning, I was plagued by the problem of getting an appropriate visa to work in the United States. The fact that I had taken a tenure-track position on a temporary visa (arranged by the University) aroused the suspicions of the INS. In their eyes, I was trying to flout the rules to gain permanent residence through irregular channels. After more than two years of paper work, my situation was resolved when I was granted permanent residence. But not that of my wife, a professional in her own right. Accompanying me on a dependent-spouse visa, she could not under any circumstances seek employment on the open market. Our efforts to get her visa changed were stonewalled by the INS. Their view was that, as a Third World person, I should consider it a privilege to be in the United States at all.

While we were battling the INS, the Australian National University awarded me a Senior Research Fellowship in 1990, and we