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Interview no. 664

Mimi R. Gladstein

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Mimi R. Gladstein
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 6, 1984
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Received B.A. from Texas Western College in 1959 and M.A. from U.T. El Paso in 1966; earned the Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico; currently a professor in the English Department.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Recollections of college life in the 1950s; comparison of students of the fifties and the eighties; student protest in 1972; what the mission of the University should be; strengths of the University.

Length of interview: 45 minutes Length of transcript: 19 pages

Mimi R. Gladstein
by Rebecca Craver
March 6, 1984

C: Tell me, what years you were a student here?

G: I came to UTEP, which wasn't UTEP, it was Texas Western College in the summer of 1954. Straight out of El Paso High for the first summer session. And then I went away to the University of Oklahoma in the fall, came back to UTEP in the summer of '55, went back to the University of Oklahoma, then came back to UTEP in the summer of '56 and the fall semester of '56. Then moved to Germany for about a year and a half, and then came back to UTEP again in '58, and got my Bachelor's Degree in '59.

C: So your degree is from Texas Western College.

G: Texas Western College, yes, my BA Degree. Then I returned in '60 to begin my Master's Degree, which I completed in '66, which was the first year it was the University [] of Texas at El Paso []. I think my Master's Degree reads from University of Texas [] at El Paso [].

C: Okay, now, did any of these years, did you live on campus or were you living at home?

G: No, I was living at home.

C: So how did you get here, did you have a car?

G: Yes, and in those days all students parked on campus. (Laughs)

C: I was going to say, was there a problem with parking then?

G: Well, not compared to the problem now. All students could park on campus and if you came at 15 minutes to eight, you were likely to find a parking space right in the center of the campus.

C: Well, that's a change. Okay, what dorms were here then?

G: I believe Bell Hall was one of them that I remember. Bell and Benedict and I believe the cafeteria was over there, in Bell Hall.

C: And the boys and girls ate together?

G: Yes.

C: Was the Union built at that time?

G: Not the new part, the old Union was built, yes. In fact, my senior prom from El Paso High was in the Ballroom of the old building.

C: Was that a program dance where you had to sign?

G: No, I don't think that particular one was. But I was at that kind of dance.

C: Do you remember any any dances on campus when you were a student here?

G: Unfortunately, when I was a student here I was here in the summer and I was a part of the college players, which meant I went to class in the morning, and my soul belonged to the Drama Department until midnight after that.

C: Well, tell me about some of those productions, what did you do?

G: Well, it was quite extraordinary in those days. Milton Leech was the chair of the department and for what he called summer stock we did five productions in six weeks, which is something which I have not seen matched at any University since or before that. We started with a musical comedy and ended with Shakespeare. And usually in-between we had some kind of mystery or melodrama. It was quite extraordinary. I didn't realize how extraordinary it was at the time and now looking back at it I can't imagine. In those days there were only two faculty members and they managed to put on this extraordinary program. One of the benefits that the Drama Department had at that time was the fact that, (it's a strange benefit but) the draft was in progress in the United States which meant that everybody was in the service. And so Fort Bliss

was very active at the time and a lot of young men and women who were just beginning their professional careers had to take time out to be in the service for two years. And we benefited from that because Milton had open casting and so we had people who were stationed down here at Fort Bliss who have since gone on to make quite big names for themselves in theater--who were down here. And so I had the opportunity as a very young Drama student to act with people like John Seifert, who now plays the police commissioner on Hill Street Blues; people like Pat Hines, who is in "Amadeus." A number of people who have gone on and, if they are not the biggest stars they're certainly well-known people in their profession. So, we acted with them and then Milton also brought in visiting professors from different places who would direct shows or do the costuming, and so if you were in summer stock, if you were a college player you were expected to be involved in all of these five productions in some way. If you were starring in one, then you headed props in another and were building a set for a third. So I was here all day long until...and then rehearsal would be in the evening, and after rehearsal everyone would go to the Hacienda for beer or something. And save very little time to do your homework for your eight o'clock class the next morning.

[_chuckles_]

C: What spelled the demise of these summer plays?

G: I think part of it was that Milton Leech got tapped to go on to administrative positions. I think he went on to head that Mission 73 or 63, and then he went on to become assistant of president or vice president and so forth and so on. So it sort of fizzled away.

C: Was your Bachelor's Degree in English, or Drama, or...?

G: Speech and Drama.

C: Speech and Drama.

G: Yes.

C: Okay, what professors do you remember from the fifties?

G: Well, of course, there was Milton Leech and I remember, my minor was in History, so I remember Dr. Strickland, and he seemed to just have an incredible mind. As a student I remember sitting in his classes and he started, he would call the roll and he would hear a name and he'd say, "Now, is your family from around Nacogdoches?" And he'd say, "Now, so and so crossed over on such and such date and married a Johnson girl from over in such and such a place." And he had this kind of a card catalog mind. He seemed he knew everybody that stepped across the Mississippi River, from 1830 on. So that was quite an extraordinary experience. And the other professor I remember that I particularly enjoyed was Dr. Porter. I took the Far East History from Dr. Porter, and that was also very interesting. In the English Department I took courses from Joe Leach, who is now my next door neighbor here. I took courses from Bob Burlingame, from Dr. Haldeen Braddy. And, of course, my very favorite was Doc Sonnichsen. I didn't much care what the subject was that he was teaching, I just took whatever course it was that he was offering. It immediately became my favorite subject, whether it was Southwestern Literature or the English Novel. So I took a lot of courses with him. I'm trying to remember the others. Gladman, who has I think just retired last year. He was a Math professor. Let me see who else I can remember. As I said, most of my course work was done at

the University of Oklahoma. Oh, Lillian Collingwood was my English professor, and she was extraordinary. I thought she was particularly good at spotting when I was being...oh, in the vernacular, when I was trying to snow her and write a paper that was very beautifully written, but didn't have much matter in it. And I always had a great deal of respect for her for giving me Bs instead of As when I...[_laughs_]...I knew I didn't deserve those As. I always respected her a great deal as a teacher.

C: When did you come back here and join the faculty?

G: I came to teach part-time in '66. I had just received my Master's Degree. My Master's was in English with a minor in History. In those days in a Master's Degree you could do that. And those were also the halcyon days of academe when student populations were just soaring. And so I had decided that I ought to go and get my Ph.D. if I wanted to teach at a University campus. And so I was going to enroll in the Ph.D. program at the University of New Mexico and I was going to take a few courses here before I went up there and I was at registration, walking down the hall and John West walked up to me and said, "Can you teach a freshman course for us?" And I, of course, said yes. I didn't have the better sense than to say yes. So I started that way and taught part-time in '66 and '67. By '68 I was enrolled in the Ph.D. program at UNM and so they took me on full time faculty here. I taught full time '68 and '69 and then went away in '70 to work on my degree.

C: And then came back?

G: Then came back in '71.

C: In '71.

G: So I've been at UTEP for almost continuously since 1954--almost

some part of every year, either as a student or as a professor, which is thirty years. [Taught]

C: Well, would you compare the quality of students and the atmosphere on campus in the '80s to the '50s?

G: Well, it may not be very flattering to the '80s, I'm afraid. I do not think that the quality of students has improved at all. Certainly it seems to me that--it's hard to judge--I mean it's hard to judge students from the perspective of being a professor, in the same way that you judge them when you were another student. I know I think I had some excellent professors at UTEP as good as professors that I had in other universities that I attended. Now, that fact is corroborated by my son who is some twenty-five or some-odd years later.

[INTERRUPTION]

Okay, anyway my son went to UTEP for his freshman year. Of course, he had Mama to guide him into particular classes, but then he went on from UTEP to Duke University, then the University of Texas at Austin and now he's at UCLA. None of those three are what we might call shabby universities. And he has repeated the thing that I say. That is that there are individual professors at UTEP that are as good as individual professors at any university in the country. Now, the mass of them may not be, but certainly, I would compare Sonnichsen and Strickland and Porter with professors that I have had [elsewhere]. And I think the same seems to be true of the faculty. There are people in our faculty that compare with faculty anywhere. And then there's miserable faculty everywhere also. My son just said that the worst course he's ever had in his whole academic career was a Ph.D. seminar at UCLA.

- C: Would you say the students are more serious now or less serious about their studies?
- G: I wouldn't say that they were more or less serious.
- C: Just about the same?
- G: I would say just about the same. We were very concerned with our social life in those days and I think they are very concerned with their social lives now.
- C: [Yes.] Well, what did you do for fun when you were a student here?
- G: Well, we went to the football games.
- C: Did they ever win?
- G: Oh, in those days, yes. Oh, yes they did. [laughs] Now, the basketball team, on the other hand, was not that good in those days. Nobody paid any attention to the basketball team in those days, and I don't think people even knew we had a track team, or maybe we didn't have a track team. So, those things have changed a great deal. What did we do? Well, you've got to remember that in those days we had a very, what shall I call it, an automobile oriented social life. We'd buzz the Oasis a lot, you know. A lot of where we went, well, there were certain kind of regular hangouts, and I guess that the same is true now. They go to Gasoline Alley or they go to various places. They expect to find their friends there. We would go down to the Oasis.
- C: Where was that?
- G: That was, it's where I think the freeway is now. I think that's what they took down to make the freeway. [chuckles] The freeway underpass, you know where that is? On Mesa and--between Missouri, and whatever the next street is after Missouri. There

were two things there, there was a drive-in restaurant called the Oasis and then there was also a Oasis right next to it where you could go in and I know that the Drama students quite often after rehearsal late, we'd go sit down and have hamburgers and things. But high school students would, what we called, buzz the Oasis. You know, you'd drive and see if anybody that you wanted to see or that you wanted to see you was there, and then you'd pull in and have a Coke and French fries or something. And I think a little of that hung over early in college. But we weren't very concerned, it seemed to me, with political ideas and I think our students now they don't pay much attention either. No, I don't think they're more serious now than we were. I think the students in the '60s were serious, concerned about the world, but that seems to have passed.

C: Well, somebody told me in the '50s that the sororities ran the school, would you agree with that?

G: Well, I wasn't a member of a sorority here. I was a member of a sorority at Oklahoma.

C: If you had wanted to be in a sorority here, would you've been allowed to be in one?

G: I don't know. I think that might've had a sorority which took people that the other sororities wouldn't take, if I'm correct about the '50s. I think they had something called Phrateres.

C: Yes.

G: And that was what people who were not White Anglo Saxon Protestant joined. But the problem never arose for me because I went to Oklahoma and I joined a sorority there. And, in fact, on that campus was very excitedly Greek. So when I came back for the

summers, and then when I returned from Germany, I was a married woman. I never did see sororities as terribly important here. And part of that was because we weren't a live-on campus. It seemed to me that at Oklahoma, for example, sororities or fraternities really ran things because so much was going on on campus. There was so many dances and there were so many programs and intramurals and all of that kind of stuff, which we didn't have here.

C: Bill Herndon said everyone left the campus at 5:00 in the fifties.

G: Yeah. I don't remember there being anything going on, so how could they have been very powerful? What did they have to have power over? If I should've felt a loss, I didn't, but it might've been because of my peculiar situation. I don't know how the girls felt who wanted to be in a sorority and maybe were excluded. I just never felt El Paso was that strong a sorority town. We didn't have sororities in high school, and I know lots of Texas cities have sororities in high school, so they already had the models of that kind of exclusivity, which we didn't have that. In fact, I was a terribly poor sorority member when I got to Oklahoma because I didn't understand what I was supposed to be doing. [chuckles]

C: I didn't either, I sort of laughed at all the ritual too.

G: I not only laughed at all the ritual but I refused to do things they told me to do. I didn't know that pledges were supposed to do what they told you. They said, "Come to study hall." I said, "Not me, I don't go to study hall." [laughter]

C: Oh, dear, that's funny. So you didn't feel any kind of discrimination because you were Jewish. Do you know any Mexican-Americans

that felt any discrimination back in the fifties?

G: I imagine the discrimination against Mexican-Americans back in the '50s was much stronger than the discrimination against Jews back in the '50s in El Paso, okay. And just talking about the history of the city. I never felt uncomfortable in a country club in this city. You know, the people I grew up with, and members of my family they all belonged and we went there for our senior prom night and all of that stuff, and I never felt as if I would be discriminated against because of my religion, it might be if I didn't have enough money, I couldn't join. But if I had enough money, I could join. Now, I'm not sure that the Mexican-Americans felt that same way. I didn't have that sense of it. First of all there was a law in those days that you couldn't speak Spanish on a school campus. And I had friends who got into trouble for speaking Spanish on the playground--on school ground.

C: And at El Paso High?

G: /Yes./ Or on a school campus, whether it was elementary school or high school.

C: Oh, really?

G: Yeah. Now my senior year, Ray Chavez was president of El Paso High. And there certainly were a number of individuals and Rafael Jesus Gonzales, who was another one of our graduates, was vice president of El Paso High. So, I don't think there was discrimination in that way. But there was a sense of, what shall I say, acceptance at limited levels perhaps. Because there was still a sense then that there wasn't inter-dating. For example, there was a certain amount of sneering if you went out with a Mexican-American boy or... And, as a matter of fact, I did go to Rafael Jesus

Gonzalez's senior prom with him, and that caused a number of raised eyebrows. Of course, that was all part of my defiant stance too. I was bound and determined to do whatever it was that would shock whoever. [chuckles] And perhaps I didn't suffer so much from that because of the nature of my personality, they expected me to do outrageous things. So it was, "Oh well, it's just something else she's doing." But I do know other girls who, if they dated a Mexican-American boy they were kind of looked down on. So that there was that kind of social discrimination, I think that went on. And I imagine it carried over to UTEP too. It certainly was not the norm; it was deviant behavior.

C: Okay. What did you wear to school?

G: Oh, that's one of the things I think's most amusing and illustrates how our mind sets change. I was in the Drama Department and that what we had to be building sets and painting them, and dragging stuff around, so naturally the best uniform for that is jeans. But there was a rule--a young woman or a girl could not come on campus in pants. If you were seen on campus in pants, you were reported to the Dean of Women. So, what we would do, is we had these big peasant skirts in those days--full circle skirts and we would put our blue jeans on, roll them up to our knees you know wear these skirts over them to come on campus. Once we got on the stage in Magoffin, which is where the productions were held in those days then we'd take our skirts off and we could go to work. When I began teaching, about 1968, I think it was or '69, the first time a female student showed up in my class in pants and I was shocked. I remember looking at her and thinking, she doesn't have the proper respect for this class.

- C: Really. And that was in '69?
- G: Sixty-nine. So we forget that the '60s didn't really begin until about '65 or '66. We were still in Camelot in '63. And then there was a shock after Camelot and then it's the reaction to all of that. That first term of Lyndon Johnson's was pretty placid, the time he won with that great landslide.
- C: That's right.
- G: So the '60s really didn't begin until about '65, '66, then they really lasted till about '72, '73. And so I was just shocked at this girl in my class in pants. I then went to the University of New Mexico, which was considerably more liberal than UTEP, for my graduate work. Now, all of my professors when I was here at UTEP came to class, and when I say all of my professors, 99 percent of them were male, and they came to class in coats and ties. And the women certainly came in heels and hose and...
- C: Girdles.
- G: Girdles, yes. And in fact I had taught in 1961 in the public schools and one of the bits of information that was given to all the teachers, I taught out at Zack White, and our principal told us that we would wear heels and hose and girdles to teach in, which astounded me. I went in to talk to him and I said, "Look, I have never worn a girdle in my life and I do not intend to start now." I said, "It's bad for you, it's unhealthy." [chuckles]
- C: There you are rebelling again.
- G: And I said, "I'm not going to teach P.E. in heels and hose either. I'm going to wear tennis shoes." Anyway, we called all our professors, this is one of the ways we knew we were in college in that our professors addressed us Miss or Mister; it was Miss Reise],

which what my name was. We were now adult, young people and we would be addressed properly. And, of course, they were all dressed very properly also. I went to UNM and my professors there were in sandals and jeans and T-shirts and beads. And some of them took one look at me and my little heels and hose and bouffant hairdo and thought, "God, there's a refugee from the supermarket." [chuckles] It was a classic instance of reverse discrimination. [laughter] I had to really fight to convince them I had any mind at all. So, when I returned from UNM, having been considerably radicalized by the experience, I was the first female professor to wear pants on this campus. And I love to tell the story that I thought, well, that I was going to frizzle a lot of the gray hairs around here, but the very second female professor to wear pants was Roberta Walker, you know, who has a beautiful head of white hair. Here I had thought that wearing pants to my class was kind of an insult, and then wearing pants was an act of freedom I guess.

C: Well, were you here when the students marched on the Administration Building?

G: I was not only here but I was looking at the whole thing from the fourth floor of the Liberal Arts Building.

C: Oh, tell me about it! What year was it?

G: I think it was '72. I was teaching on the fourth floor of the Liberal Arts Building in that corner room, which overlooks the Administration Building. And the whole thing looked about as dangerous to me as, I mean, if there was an emergency I didn't see it. I think it was a convenient excuse to give us a new precedent for some kind of state of tighter supervision or

organization. Well, of course, I had been at UNM where eleven people had been bayoneted. I'd been at UNM where...I wouldn't teach in the Naval Arts Bldg. because there were threats to blow it up. I had seen real riots and what was going on here was nothing compared to what I had seen going on in those other places. And I had seen also, some years later I was in Greece during the changeover from the military junta to the republican form of government and I had seen forty thousand Greeks under my hotel window screaming, "Exitu Americani," get out American fascist pigs, and I had seen a small number of Greek police handle that mob beautifully. You know, any kind of trained police can handle a situation like that. I think what was involved here in this riot couldn't have been more than a hundred people.

C: Did you see armed guards?

G: Yes, I saw the police out here and the whole bit but the thing is that who they were armed against didn't seem to be nearly as threatening--it was like bringing out your cannons to battle flies, or something. The response seemed all out of proportion to the danger.

C: Well, what do you understand the students were protesting?

G: I think, if I'm not mistaken, was that they wanted a Chicano faculty, they wanted the inclusion of information about Mexican-American contributions to our society, and a revisionist history of the area, I guess, included in the curriculum.

PAUSE

C: Do you think there were outside agitators involved in the '72 protest?

G: I'd know of none, you know. I don't recall there being any, but

I wasn't in the Chicano Student Organization so how would I know? Now, I do remember you know outside groups coming to campus, like the Fourth World Coalition or something like that brought here by MEChA and by the Black Student Union, and I remember a particularly amusing sequence where they were showing a vehemently anti-American, anti-Israeli film--called, We are the Palestinians, and they came here because they wanted to mobilize people on behalf of the PLO. And at this meet one of the students from here on campus got up and said, "How do you feel about Aztlán?" And these were students or outside agitators from Los Angeles, someplace like that, and they said, "Aztlán? What's Aztlán?" And this guy said, "What are you doing coming over here and asking us to worry about something that's half a world apart if you're not willing to fight for this, which is Aztlan, which is our country which the Gringos have taken away from us!" So that sort of ended that question of the outside agitators. [Chuckles] That was the only instances where I had firsthand knowledge of somebody from outside coming in and trying to arouse students, you know, to do something. They sort of said, "No way." But, I don't know there may have been, who knows, in those days of the '60s. There was a certain amount of communication, campus to campus, but I never did feel that our campus was one of the hotbeds of activity. Even our streaking, which was one of those you know expressions of the time, was so unimaginative. I mean, they would announce that there was going to be streakers at such and such a place, which defeats the whole purpose of streaking. The whole purpose of streaking is shock, you know, in the most unlikely place at the most unlikely time somebody streaks through. Well,

here we'd have this announcement that there's going to be the streakers coming down University Drive in front of the Liberal Arts Bldg. and people would line up on both sides of the streets, and then a truck would [chuckles] drive through with about four or five naked people. [laughter] And I thought, well this is not exactly the zenith of social awareness here. So, yeah, that's the kind of radical activity on campus in those days.

C: Do you remember any pranks, tricks played either on faculty or on other students?

G: Well, I do remember in those days that, and this is I guess not too long ago, but there were the pie contracts.

C: Pie contracts?

G: Pie contracts. And one particular person in the English Department had a contract put out on him, that was Bob Esch, and he was standing in his class, talking about Shakespeare's sonnets and waxing eloquent on the very line he was saying, "Well, shall I compare Thee to a summer's day", and well, he got a pie in his face. [laughter] That I do remember. I don't remember about any particular pranks played on me. It was kind of interesting 'cause you never knew in those days what the perception was that students had of you, and in one class I was just amused and amazed because I had people bringing me Black Panther magazines, because they were sure I was in total sympathy with the Black Panthers, and in the same class, students would bring me kind of right-wing Moral Majority readings.

C: Did they think you needed that?

G: No, they thought I was in sympathy. So I thought "I'm giving off a very weird message here," [laughs] because they're

thinking I'm radical left and radical right at the same time. The only thing, I guess, they weren't thinking was that I was middle of the road. And, in the '60s there was a sensitivity to issues; there were students that were concerned that when you talked about a political situation or when you talked about rights, it was something that meant something to them. I think now when you talk about rights in a class, the students get this sort of glazed look-like on their faces. If I could make a generalization, and I think generalizations are dangerous, it seems to me that the '80s are more like the '50s, that we had that kind of break in there--in the late '60s and early '70s.

C: What do you think the mission of this University is or should be?

G: Well, I think the mission of any institution of higher learning should be to be as good an institution as it can possibly be. And I think that our mission is to become better, and better and better. I think we need to support what research is done here. I'm very much opposed to what I sense is this drawing in of our horizons, rather than expanding. I think we should be allowed to be as good as we can be. And what I sense is an attitude among some administrators, it's funny you should ask that because I have this infamous document on mission role and scope on my desk right now, and the idea that we should think of ourselves only as a local university... We are the only university in Texas within a very, what's the next university in Texas?

C: Abilene Christian College, I don't know. [laughs]

G: No, universitys.

C: Oh, universitys.

G: Texas Tech, I guess.

C: Texas Tech, I guess.

G: That's four-hundred and some-odd miles away isn't it? It's incredible that we should seek to limit ourselves. It seems to me that we could be a quite excellent school. We have the potential. Now, I don't think we can be excellent in everything--don't think we have the resources for that.

C: What do you think we should be excellent in?

G: I think those areas in which there is the potential now for excellence, we ought to put our resources into those areas.

C: Which are?

G: Well, I understand we have a very good Psychology Department; we have a very good History Department; we have a very good English Department; we have very good, well we've always been a college of Engineering; and Geology. All this business about Business accreditation in putting all those millions of dollars into that, you know, you're having to start from point 0, and my husband is a businessman and all my family is in business and I have had many conversations with downtown businessmen and I'll quote Martin Kern, who is President of the State National Bank, and he said to me, "When my employees come to me and tell me they want to go back to college to take some courses," he says that they want to take Business courses, "I encourage them," he says, "to take courses in the Humanities." He says, "Whatever techniques we want them to use or methodologies we want to use, we'll teach them. And what they need is some of those Humanities courses so that they're educated human beings, so they learn to analyze, and they learn to read and write." And that's my feeling too. I feel that we are trying too hard to pander to fads of the moment,

as far as degrees are concerned, and that we are diverting resources that could more profitably be used in the areas that we are already excellent in. So that we could be first rate in certain areas. I think our College of Nursing is excellent. So why take all these millions to try to build this College of Business thing? I think I saw a study that indicated that our graduates don't do any better or worse for not being accredited-- that business people hire them, [they] aren't that concerned with accreditation and yet, they want to put this multimillion dollar program in to build that up. I don't see that as being valid. What else are we excellent in? Nursing, Engineering, Geology... There was a time, and I don't know what the situation is now, but there was a time when we had a quite excellent pre-med program. There are a large number of doctors practicing in El Paso who had absolutely no trouble getting into medical schools coming out of our pre-med program. I'm sorry to say I don't know what its status is right now. But I knew that anytime Anton Berkman wrote or recommended for someone to get into medical school, that person got into medical school.

C: We have him on a tape. And he said 95 percent of his pre-med students that applied to med school got in. That's a pretty good record.

G: Yes, it is. And, you know, and I know those doctors myself.
[Laughs]

C: Yeah, right. [laughter] Okay, well, I guess that's it, I don't want to take up the rest of your afternoon.

G: Okay, I enjoyed it.