

Episode 5 Script: Why Can't I Be Both?

Brendan: In the late 1840s, a new neighborhood was forming in Lower Manhattan. Today, New Yorkers know it as the Lower East Side today, but 179 years ago, it was called Kleindeutschland, or Little Germany.

Kleindeutschland was massive. There was nothing little about it. 200,000 German speakers lived in New York City by 1860. A quarter of the entire city's population.

To outsiders such as Irish Immigrants or native-born Americans the neighborhood likely appeared "monolithic." Imagine walking into Kleindeutschland as an outsider. You would have smelled German foods. Heard the chords of German music wafting out of basement beer saloons and tenement apartment windows. You would have seen advertisements and newspapers in German. German signs nailed above shop doors. Everything about Little Germany seemed German, so it's safe to assume everyone was German, right?

The reality, however, is much more complicated.

I'm Brendan Murphy from the Tenement Museum. Welcome back to How to Be American.

In this week's episode, we're going to look at the diversity within the heart of two immigrant communities, Kleindutschland of the 1860s and Little Caribbean of today. We'll begin in the mid-1800s and meet the Schneiders, a married couple who operated a larger beer saloon outside of 97 Orchard Street.

And then, we'll head across the East River and into the great borough of Brooklyn to compare and contrast Little Germany with Little Caribbean, with the help of Shelley Worrell, of the organization CaribBeing.

Kleindeutschland, which existed from the 1850s to the late-1870s, was one of the first foreign-language speaking enclaves to dominate Lower Manhattan. It was the fifth largest German-speaking "city" in the world, with about 250 dialects spoken.

You see, the country we call 'Germany' today, didn't unify until 1871. It was made up of over 39 states and free cities with distinctive regions and cultures. So, for more than 20 years, Germans immigrating to New York City would have called themselves Prussians, Bavarians, Württembergers, Badens, Saxons, and many others that I can't pronounce.

That diversity was reflected in religious persuasions as well. There were German-Lutherans, German-Catholics, and German-Jews. 30% of this not-so-little Germany's population wasn't even of German descent. Little Germany was far more diverse than outsiders might have realized in the mid-1800s.

At the Tenement Museum, we have a window into these diverse identities through the stories of two residents of 97 Orchard Street: John and Caroline Schnieder.

John Schneider was a Bavarian boy when he arrived in New York City in 1842. Five years later, Caroline Dietman left Prussia as a teenager, also bound for New York.

As they established themselves here, neither of them would have identified as German. They had their own varied cultures and culinary traditions—a Bavarian pretzel and a Prussian pretzel were not the same pretzel.

And here's the twist, in 1863, this Bavarian man married this Prussian woman. One year later, they opened a saloon together, slinging lagers to the locals of Kleindeutschland.

We don't know the details of John and Caroline's meeting, but let's pause for a moment and think about their unique union. Historically, we know it would have been highly unlikely for a Bavarian to marry a Prussian in Europe; Prussia went to war with Bavaria. But in the new world, there was opportunity for John and Caroline to build a life together. And this was true for other locals of Little Germany as well.

Native-born Americans wouldn't necessarily have understood how improbable that kind of union was for folks in their homelands. But for John and Caroline; it's safe to say it was a big deal.

John and Caroline's saloon was the kind of place where German immigrants could sit shoulder to shoulder and find comfort in all facets of their lives: the emotional toll of leaving their nations, the reasons for doing so, the work it took to preserve their unique identities, the pressure of assimilation, and their journey to becoming American. Stories like these were shared over a lager, bratwurst, and pickled-pigs' feet to the backdrop of German melodies. As one of the largest immigrant populations on the move, German immigrants eventually spread out from Lower Manhattan and moved throughout New York and beyond. Kleindeutschland became the Lower East Side.

Over the next century, new generations of immigrant entrepreneurs introduced their languages and traditions to American, including Caribbean immigrants, who began arriving in large numbers in the 1960s.

The journeys and stories of Caribbean immigrants are very different from German immigrants. Although there are stories to the parallels of these communities, it's important to remember that German immigrants benefited from white privilege, and that's not the case for all immigrants.

To gain some context about Caribbean immigration and to learn more about the challenges of establishing an immigrant community in America, we reached out to Christina Greer, a Tenement Museum board member and Fordham University professor well-versed on this topic.

Christina Greer: I'm Christina Greer, an associate professor of Political Science and American studies at Fordham University Lincoln Center campus. I'm the author of *Black Ethnics, Race, Immigration, and the Pursuit of the American Dream*. And I'm the cohost of the New York centered podcast, *FAQ NYC*.

Brendan: Christina described parallels between the German immigrants of the 19th century and Caribbean immigrants in the 20th century: again, both were viewed by outsiders as monolithic communities. In other words, they were perceived to all be the same.

Christina: I think history sort of collapses them in ways that they weren't a monolith at the time. So, when you think about, say German immigrants, I mean, they were people from different parts of Germany and they didn't necessarily get along and they settled in different parts of the city based on social networks and political networks. Same with Italians, northern versus southern. Same with Irish folks, you know, depending on whether you came here for economic reasons or economic despair. Um, and we've definitely seen that with, say, Jewish communities, you know, Ashkenazi Jews versus Sephardic Jews. Jews that came as refugees versus Jews that came in at different point in time, um, for economic pursuits. And having these tensions within communities I think has always been something that's existed.

Brendan: Yet she also explained that a “Black Monolith”, extending beyond Caribbean immigrants to include all quote unquote “Black people,” presents a singular set of challenges that make creating and maintaining communities like Little Caribbean imperative.

Christina: Black immigrants, because they're coming in as voluntary immigrants to a nation that is predicated on essentially anti-Black racism for them to become American is to become Black American with this mandatory prefix. The diversity within Black immigrants is vast. Um, not just linguistic diversity, uh, not just geographic diversity. Uh, we're talking religious diversity as well, which a lot of people sort of ignore. You know, there's a longstanding history of black Catholics. There's a longstanding history of black Muslims. You know, not everyone is a descendant of the US South and is Baptist.

Brendan: Christina walked us through the ways that the repercussions of the Black monolith have played out for Caribbean immigrants eager to live the American Dream.

Christina: I found in my research was this frustration, especially with Caribbean immigrants, especially with second generation Caribbean immigrants who essentially have said, well, I came here at the same time as someone from say Europe or South America. Why is it that... or Asia; why is it their life chances are different from mine? Largely just because they don't have a black prefix in front of their American status. So, the brochure says one thing, but in actuality the

deliverables are totally different. And is it because I'm black or I'm, I'm sort of put into a black category?

And I think that's what complicates the American dream because everyone comes here essentially seeking very similar things, a better life in some capacity, whether you're a refugee or whether you're a college educated doctor who wants to come here and practice a particular specialty, you're looking for a certain type of life for you and your family and your loved ones. Um, and you want to create a community and you want to do better, and this is the country that has always said, please come. You know, look at the Statue of Liberty, like welcome to our shores, but that's been on the brochure and that's actually never fully been in practice. Um, and I think that's the shocking thing for some immigrants. That's the disappointing factor for others. Um, and that's the sort of angering principle for, for many.

Brendan: She pointed out that the Caribbean's close geographic proximity to the United States also affects how Caribbean immigrants approach living in America.

Christina: Caribbean immigrants were very frustrated with the promise of America and the American dream. And I realize it's because they have a different exit option. And so I interviewed a lot of Caribbeans who said, well, you know, this country isn't really what it promised to be, but I can always go home. Now whether or not they go home is a different story and home meaning their respective countries in the Caribbean.

For Black immigrants, we're seeing people wanting to keep their accents and wanting to make sure they keep their, their names that may not sound quote unquote American, to distinguish themselves from black Americans, uh, either in the job market or in the housing market or whatever they perceive as an opportunity moving forward.

Brendan: Christina highlighted the ways this has altered perceptions of public figures of Caribbean descent, including Civil Rights leaders like Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to the US House of Representatives, who represented parts of Brooklyn from 1969 to 1983. Her district included Bedford-Stuyvesant, the neighborhood where she grew up. Chisholm also became the first Black person to run for President of the United States for a major party, in 1972.

Christina: Civil rights leaders, when you scratch the surface, many of them are Caribbean and in some way, but they present as black Americans fighting for black Americans struggles because that's what made sense.

We have a little more space and time and distance to look at Shirley Chisholm and say, okay, so as an elected official, as a freedom fighter, as a pioneer and a trailblazer, she was not only a woman and a black woman, she was also a Caribbean woman, uh, from Guyana. And so that, that granular distinction means a lot to a lot of people. But at the same time, Black Americans

can claim her as well because in Brooklyn she fought for Black people, um, as well as everyone else in her district.

But as I like to remind everyone, this is America. There's no such thing as scarce resources. Like we have plenty of resources. It's just whether or not you and your community are going to get them. Um, and that's far too often. Uh, immigrant communities don't get them. Communities of Color don't get the marginalized communities, don't get them in. Poor communities don't get them. So it's easy to keep people fighting over crumbs because you don't have to worry about them ever demanding a seat at the table.

Brendan: Shirley Chisholm is still paving the way. In 2020 she will become the first woman with a statue dedicated to her in Brooklyn. The design looks fantastic.

Despite the enormous socio-political obstacles that Christina highlighted, the Caribbean community in Flatbush, Brooklyn, is thriving, in part thanks to Shelley Worrell, the founder of the cultural advocacy organization CaribBeing.

I wanted to learn about Shelley's roots as a Caribbean-American. She told me that her father came to New York from Trinidad in the 60s, when he was just sixteen years old. The eldest of thirteen children, he was the first of the family to come to the United States.

Shelley Worrell: He came here on a boat, actually, so he took a job as a day laborer or some kind of labor on the boat. I guess made the decision when he arrived in New York that he would, um, connect with his family. Um, which at the time was just his, it was his aunt, her name was Edna, and he, she lived on Marion Street in Brooklyn. It still amazes me how he would find her. There was a lot of, um, writing back and forth. Um, my mother still has all of the letters that her family wrote her, um, when she moved here. So I imagined that he had her address and somehow found her and settled in Brooklyn and he lived there until he passed away. And he very much considered himself to be an American.

I think his heart was probably filled with hope because he, I think he knew what he was doing. I think he knew and had an intention of saying in New York, um, or in the United States.

Brendan: Shelley's father held a bunch of jobs: he worked for a shipping company, in ATM operations, even as a beer importer. But throughout his American journey, he maintained his Trinidadian identity.

In the early 70s, Shelley's dad, who was at that point an American citizen, returned to Trinidad for Carnival, when he met the woman who would become Shelley's mom.

Shelley: My father was in Trinidad for Carnival in the '70s, I believe it was probably 1971, and met my mother in a taxi and followed her home, a little stalkerish, but romantic, right? My mother was, had just finished school and she was working, working as an accountant

at Kirpalani, which was like a general, big general store. She was from the country, so I'm had moved to town to work.

And then she came to join him here in 1972, to Brooklyn. They lived to 2150 Bedford Avenue. And my father always talked about that and that's why that address is etched in my mind, um, because that was their first apartment together. And from there they moved to Ocean Avenue, um, where my aunt actually still lives. So that, uh, the Ocean Avenue apartment is still in my family.

Brendan: More of the family eventually joined him at that apartment. Shelley was born there.

Shelley: Until he passed away, he always talked about 2150 Bedford Avenue and every time he would drive by there, it was just something that repeated in his, his, his memory for a really long time.

They sponsored their entire families. So, at that time you could put everyone's name on a form. Um, and everyone who was not married, every unmarried sibling. Um, and most of that, most of my relatives were not married at the time, or maybe they didn't get married because they knew that they had this opportunity to, to come and join their siblings and family in New York. So my father, first my mother came, I'm sorry, I'm, his mother came. And then, um, that was followed by two aunts and an uncle. Um, so they came here. They're US born. Um, that's Brian, Geneva, and Beverly. And then similarly, my mother first brought my grandmother and she lived, we actually shared a room. I remember that. Um, so she would only come home on weekends because my grandmother, my maternal was a home health aide. And, and then after that, um, the siblings started to come up in, in groups.

Caribbean households are really loud. Everyone's always talking. Um, and at least in my family, so I have a lot of women in my family and there's always a lot of food. There was a time when I had an aunt with her husband and four children living with us. I have at least a hundred first cousins. I stopped counting.

Brendan: During her youth, Shelley travelled frequently to Trinidad to spend time with her extended family.

Shelley: I started traveling to Trinidad as early as six months old. So, I never remembered not having a passport. Um, I, there was a moment, two years ago are where my passport expired and I totally freaked out because, I was like, oh my God! Like, it's just like something that I've always had. Yeah, so I spent all of my early summers, um, in Trinidad, um, not only with my grandparents, aunts, uncles, but also cousins. So, when they came here, they weren't strangers to me. Um, because we also have a lot of great memories back home as well.

Trinidad is, um, the southernmost island in the Caribbean, um, and it's off the coast of Venezuela. So, it's Trinidad in Tobago. It's a twin island republic. My parents are both from the

Eastern region of Trinidad. So my mother is from, um, Sangre Grande, which is considered the country. And my father's from Curepe, which is very close to university. So, I spent more time with my mother's side of the family, but I also spent significant time with my father's side, in Curepe, which was a little bit more, um, it's less country than Sangre Grande was. So, um, my grandmother, uh, in, in Sangre Grande, she, she cooked food and she sold it to people, um, in the, the town. Um, a lot of taxi drivers would stop at our house, five o'clock in the morning for her pies and her pastries and juices and that kind of thing.

And of course my grandmother cooked a lot. I have two aunts on that side who are professional chefs and they have culinary, um, careers. One just retired. And on my father's side, um, it was a little different because my grandfather worked for the water company and an uncle, so they had a little bit more money and my father too, and other, um, the migration started a little bit earlier, um, on that side of the family. So, there was also this, you know, shipment of goods back and forth as well as the remittances coming a little bit earlier. So, but again, it was still crowded because that side of the family is much larger. There are 13 children and a lot of grandchildren. So, um, again, lots of fun and a lot of early supernatural stories. So I remember sometimes we had to like walk into the house backwards and sprinkle salt around the house, um, because of the spirits.

Brendan: Those trips, Shelley explained, ended up playing a big role in helping her shape her identity.

Shelley: Well I was always a Yankee, as much as I wanted to be Trinidadian. I had a great accent for a really long time. I literally did everything that I could do and I could, I could still turn it on when, as I, um, sometimes, especially when I'm around my family. Naturally, I can't force it, but I was always Yankee, but it was, yeah, I mean I was definitely the outsider. I mean they let me know that I wasn't from there, but I wasn't excluded or anything, um, from anything, from, from any activities, but yeah, I mean I, some of my best friends are still in Trinidad and I'm still very much in touch with them via WhatsApp and social media and when I see them.

Brendan: A few weeks after Shelley and I first spoke, we met up in Flatbush to chat more about CaribBeing, the organization that she founded. We also took a tour of Little Caribbean, which, in 2017, became designated as a cultural destination, thanks to Shelley's work.

Shelley explained that CaribBeing began as a film festival focused on Caribbean cinema, the first of its kind in New York City.

Shelley: It was something that came to me while I was an undergrad. So around 1999, 2000, you know, I saw this deficit of myself and my family, my peers represented here in New York City. So I had the idea, I was very interested in media and tourism at the time, which is why we started off with film. Um, so it's something that came to me during my undergraduate studies. I was studying anthropology and the Caribbean, right, but then I was working in media and I was specifically working in media distribution. So I was working in global digital distribution. And so,

you know, it was natural for me to go out and secure rights for films, whether they were classic or contemporary. And another thing that was really bothering me is that a lot of people had not seen themselves reflected in media.

Brendan: Soon, however, the organization expanded its reach beyond film.

Shelley: We celebrate Caribbean culture, arts, lifestyle, heritage. Um, since we started, the organization has evolved quite a bit. So, we started off as the Flatbush film festival. Um, so a very ambitious, um, beginning, um, because you know, what we, we learned very quickly is it's really hard to have a film festival for a lot of different reasons. Number one, it's fixed at a particular moment in time. Right. So, it happens the same time every year, so you cannot be responsive to what's happening in your community. You don't want to wait for our festival to them to be talking about that within our community.

Since then we just have really iterated and grown the brand, um, to be like more culture, heritage, lifestyles, so we're doing food events. We're doing walking tours, um, we have pop-up shops, art exhibitions, cultural performances, you know, just a number of different programming. Uh, so that's why it's become more of a curated hub or a platform

Brendan: I was excited to explore the neighborhood with Shelley, and basically get a private walking tour.

Shelley: It's a really nice day. I mean, it's a weekday afternoon, so it's not as, as busy as it would be if you were walking down Flatbush on a Saturday or Sunday. But you could still hear the music and the sounds. And, um, which is really heartwarming. And so one of my favorite things, I'm not sure if I mentioned this before, to do on a Saturday or Sunday during the summer, it's just walk down Flatbush because it's very colorful. Um, and of course, you know, you just, it's, it's a great place for people watching – the sights and sounds.

Brendan: Shelley showed us where the dollar cabs pick up.

Shelley: Dollar cabs are along Church Avenue. Again, that's another tradition that was brought with a Caribbean immigrants, from Jamaica, Trinidad, from Haiti to New York City. During the strike in, I believe, was it the '90s? This is how people got back and forth to work, right. Because there was like no public transportation and so everyone was, you know, hopping on these dollar vans to get into the city.

Brendan: Later, she took us to one of her favorite spots, Jen's Roti, where Jen herself walked us through some of the delicious food in display in the cozy, counter service restaurant.

Shelley: So we're going to stop here at Jen's Roti. Do you want to go inside or... yeah, we can go in.

Jen of Jen's Roti: We have chicken pillow, which is the rice and beans cooked with a chicken in it. It's called pillow. We have peas and rice. We have stewed chicken. We have the most interest in with potatoes and chickpeas that goes with any of the meal, like the rotis. We have chicken, we have oxtail, stew chicken.

Brendan: As we were wrapping up, Shelley pointed out the more noticeable signs that the neighborhood is changing.

Shelley: If you look down, we're on Flatbush and Albemarle, so we're looking East and you'll start to see, you'll see some buildings that are, are starting to rise up, which are well above what the normal sight lines would be. And this is something that has become very, very frequent and, um, prevalent in the neighborhood. So we're in the height of it right now. In fact, there was an article that came out in Brooklyner that's talking about a lot of the displacement and I'm development that's happening in the neighborhood at the moment. So, we're literally in it.

Brendan: After the tour, I was curious to hear more about how Little Caribbean became an official cultural hub of New York City.

Shelley: When I quit my job and my father became very ill, and I quit my job and I started walking a lot in the neighborhood because I'm no longer taking the subway to Manhattan, right to Eighth Avenue to the Google building. I'm suddenly like walking down Flatbush Avenue and I'm noticing the changes and thinking about, not only my parents, but just all of the immigrants who have migrated to this community. And, and that we had not been more memorialized in New York City. And that's how the idea of Little Caribbean came to be.

Brendan: Shelley has been thrilled by the support from the city.

Shelley: They want to work with us to, to really promote, um, Little Caribbean as one of the immigrant neighborhoods in Brooklyn and in New York City, that's in their portfolio. So I think that it's certainly advancing. Um, the challenge is, um, you know, we need, we need more guides, more people to do these tours. Um, but that's also for me then a bit challenging because I know all of these businesses, so it's really hard, like, to transfer that to someone else. Um, and I'm sure that there are other people who have really great relationships with the neighborhood and, and with people in it. Um, but I think it's really important to remain authentic, um, to not only the neighborhood, but also to, to our culture and our heritage as well.

Brendan: Shelley explained that it's going to be a big summer for CaribBeing, including use of the Caribbean House, a traveling exhibit housed in a shipping container.

Shelley: Yeah. So we have a new partnership with the Prospect Park Alliance and so they've really been very generous and there is a lot of integration to their programming. Um, so the, we're planning on taking the CaribBeing House, um, to Prospect Park in June, which is Caribbean-American Heritage month. Um, so the, the house will be stationed at the Carousel, which is very exciting. The carousel music sounds like it will be great. And we'll also be doing a skating party there, and we'll be curating a day with Smorgasburg. We'll have some exciting, um, vendors and we'll be doing a pop up like condiment bar there. So we'll be selling a lot of like pepper sauces and rubs. And of course, our merch, our aprons and tea towels. Um, we are also doing a popup with West Elm in Dumbo in June as well.

So June is a pretty busy month, uh, because it's Caribbean American heritage month. We're also doing another campaign with Link NYC. And so that's usually citywide. So we celebrate Caribbean contemporary and past historic figures on the link billboards throughout the city. So last year we had over 15 million impressions. So people like Shirley Chisholm, Marcus Garvey, but also contemporary figures as well. Um, Juno Diaz, um, Majah Hype, who's a very well-known comedian. Um, Spice, who's an artist, she's a reggae artist, dancehall artists. Um, so we try to, to keep it really contemporary but also, um, honor people who came before us, um, and who made significant contributions to Caribbean American history. And then in August we always have an annual residency with the Brooklyn Museum.

Brendan: Shelley's work is astounding, and her family history is incredible. But what struck me the most about Shelley is her pride in her culture and her identity.

Shelley: There's no one that I know in my family who identify as being Black American, you know, whether they're even the first generations. Right. And, you know, the, the second generation, they are old enough, you know, informed enough in their identity for me to really understand their sense of identity or cultural heritage. But I can certainly say everyone in my generation, like the first generation and even some of those who are half, like, my older brother is half black American and he considers themselves to be very west Indian. Um, so my experience is yes, I've for sure I identify as being American, but never have identified as being a Black American.

My history is not a Black American history. Like my parents were both immigrants. They came to this country in the '60s and '70s. So, you know, I just don't have that generations of, of history in this, in this country. And you know, for me, I was very fortunate in that from a very early age, I was traveling back and forth. So it was like I grew up between the Caribbean and, and New York. I spent every summer in the Caribbean. I'm from six months on, I may have even been prior to six months old. Um, so it was always really, really clear. And my parents never assimilated. They became citizens and very much American, like they did not want to, I mean, my mother would not want to move back to Trinidad and my father does not want to move back to Trinidad. However, they don't consider themselves to be Black Americans. Um, and I just can't think of anyone in my family or anyone that I know that it's of Caribbean descent that considers themselves, and I think that, you know, when you think about it politically is that I

think it took a long time for Black Americans to understand that everyone isn't a Black American, that there are Black people.

You know, at least for me, when I was growing up, like that was a really big challenge for my, for, for me, like in high school, I remember like, people when I was like, I'm west Indian, they're like, whoa, what does that mean? You know, like, are you saying that you're not like one of us? But it's like, no, I mean, I mean kind of, but yeah, I'm Black, but I'm not like American, but I'm American too, you know? So it was kind of, you know, it was kind of weird and, and then, but the, but the funny thing is, the flip of that is that when you go back home to the Caribbean, you're not Caribbean, you're the Yankee. I like faked it for a long time. I had like the perfect Trinidadian accent and like, you know, I would tell people I was born in Trinidad, like, cause I so wanted to be born there.

Like I even had the hospital and everything and I got my citizenship. But like, then at a certain point I just realized like I didn't have to prove anything to anyone. Um, and immediate in my father was like the most classic one. He's like, you're not, you're American. Like, and he didn't say it was like Black American because I mean he knew that, you know, of course he's my father and my mom is, is also from Trinidad. However, he did not consider me to be Trinidadian. Um, but I'm like, why can't I be both? And, and now I just, I am.

Brendan: As we can see from history, immigrants have consistently been grouped together into monoliths. We still do it today. Consider how people are referred to in the news or when you're hearing about voting blocs like the Latinx vote or the Black vote. And, sure, it makes sense. We can't name everyone individually.

But we also have to be careful when we group people into categories, because it can perpetuate stereotypes and flatten the incredible diversity within communities. Learning from Shelley and hearing her story and the story of her parents was a privilege and reinforced something that we believe in strongly here at the Tenement Museum. We are a collection of our stories. Stories of our parents and our grandparents. Stories of our past homes and our future ones. Stories of our cultures and our own experiences. If we lose that, we lose the fact that every person inside these monoliths is a human.

We also lose the chance to learn from each other. More than anything, throughout the making of this episode, I've learned that the only thing for me to do, and for many of us to do, is listen. Furthermore, I learned that there is a huge difference between a neighborhood named by outsiders and a neighborhood named by the people who live there. I'm really glad I walked around with her, and stopped into her favorite places, and let her show me the diversity there.

Identity is a complex and complicated topic, all the more so when race is a central tenant. We're not going to come to any firm conclusions in a single podcast episode, but we can start listening.

Thanks for listening to How to be American.

Join us next time for a conversation about immigration, comic books, and the American Dream. How to be American is a podcast created the Tenement Museum. This episode was produced by Max Savage Levenson. Craig Kepen is our editor and composer.

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I'm Brendan Murphy. Thanks for listening.