

Chapter 15: Toward a Feminist Sonic Pedagogy: Research as Listening

By Brandee Easter, York University, Toronto, Ontario

and Meg M. Marquardt, Mississippi State University

1. Episode 1: The Pitch by Abby

In this episode, Abby gives her first pitch for looking at the mystery of Robert Grunenwald, the man behind a UW–Madison urban legend.

Transcript

[intro music: “Come to Me” by Lily & Madeleine]

Christine: He’s very mysterious, probably a little understood, but since I’ve never spoken to him, all I can say is I think he’s dangerous.

Jess: A tall man in College Library with a bit of a hunchback, just staring at people and doing his own thing, you know? He’s very just, very mysterious. Tunnel Bob is mysterious, and that’s what comes to mind.

[music fades out]

Abby: Underneath the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus runs miles and miles of steam tunnels. Access to these tunnels is completely forbidden to the public, so only maintenance crews and other city employees are allowed down there. But maybe I shouldn’t say they’re completely forbidden. I’m Abby Smith, and you’re listening to “Substratum.”

Robert Grunenwald is a middle-aged man who lurks in these blistering steam tunnels every night. No one is quite sure how he gets in, what he does during the daytime, or why he is so fascinated with spending time in the tunnels. Because of this, he’s been given the nickname Tunnel Bob. All we as the public know about Tunnel Bob is that he can withstand the 120-degree vault and its perpetual darkness and that he often makes unsettling appearances on campus.

Jess: I have encountered Tunnel Bob at College Library multiple times. He either sits in a chair and pretends like he’s reading a book or a newspaper, but really he’s just staring at everyone. [chuckles] Or he stands by the window and stares at everyone.

Emily: The second time I saw him, I was walking to a football game, and he just kind of like emerged and then disappeared. It was spooky.

[quiet spooky music]

Jess: Mysterious.

Emily: Spooky, I know.

Abby: Tunnel Bob, for most students at UW–Madison, is a distant myth. Rumors constantly fly about this mysterious man. Is he a war veteran? Is he intellectually disabled? Is he simply a quirky engineer obsessed with the mechanics of steam pipes? Few people know details about him and just dismiss him as some creep who likes to spend time in restricted areas. [music fades back in] Even fewer have taken the time to actually communicate with him and attempt to understand him. [music fades out]

Jess: I feel like if I were to speak to him, I would think he’s a nice guy. But he’s afraid of women, so I’m never gonna speak to him.

Abby: So you just say he's, like, misunderstood?

Jess: Yeah, yes! I think he's misunderstood. I don't think he's . . . I can't say he's weird because you just never know what's going on with them you know. I think he's very misunderstood.

Abby: How are we able to decipher his motives and mindset in order to better understand him as a person? Some people on campus have had the opportunity to speak with him, so they might be able to help me figure him out, but, ultimately, only a face-to-face conversation with Tunnel Bob himself will give me the opportunity to clarify this mystery. But could it or will it ever even happen?

Tunnel Bob is a genuine person with genuine emotions, interests, and ambitions, but his attraction to these tunnels kind of distracts everyone from his humanity.

[outro music fades in: "Come to Me" by Lily & Madeline]

His past might have a serious impact on why he does what he does in the present, but his life story is uncharted territory. That is the mystery I'm attempting to unravel in this podcast. Who is the genuine Tunnel Bob? And why does he spend so much time in the tunnels?