

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

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4. Episode 4: Observation/Testing by Abby, Carly, and Emily

In Episode 4, Abby, Carly, and Emily try to retrace Grunenwald's steps in places where his urban legend is most commonly recurs: College Library.

Transcript

[intro music, then fades into background: "Come to Me" by Lily & Madeline]

Carly: Hey everyone, and welcome back to "Substratum," our week-by-week mystery podcast. This is Carly, and I'm with my colleagues Abby and Emily. We're still unraveling the mystery of Robert Grunenwald, otherwise known as Tunnel Bob.

Emily: In last week's episode, we aimed to learn more about Robert through the opinions and experiences of our friends who were Madison locals, students at UW, and maintenance interns. Some of them had personally met and interacted with Robert while others had only heard or read stories about him. We noted that none of them had anything negative to say about Robert, such as him being creepy, dangerous, or having bad intentions. Their common consensus was that although a bit eccentric, he's just a regular guy who likes spending his time in the steam tunnels.

Carly: While not many new things were learned about Robert, we were able to remove a few of the rumors that circulate about him from our list. For example, it has been said that Robert is afraid of women and may even dislike them. From his pleasant and polite interaction with Emily, one of our own producers, we think it is safe to say he is not afraid of women, nor does he dislike them. If he did, he likely would not have spoken up and offered to watch her things.

Abby: Additionally, many people have said that he is creepy, silent, and has bad intentions. From the story we heard last week about Robert inviting students to play hide and seek in the tunnels, we learned that he does enjoy interacting and even playing with others, proving that he isn't just a creepy guy who follows people around silently. While this one incident does not prove that he has no bad intentions, it does show that there is more to him than just being a silent figure that watches people.

Emily: While our interviews gave us insight and a variety of perspectives on this mystery, we were left hungry for more. We still haven't been able to speak with Tunnel Bob himself, and we are still perplexed by the public's fascination with him. Throughout our whole podcast, we've been relying on outside information to get answers. But this week, we've decided to take matters into our own hands.

Carly: This week, we're focusing on our own observations and testing. We divided up and individually observed the locations on campus in which Tunnel Bob likes to spend his time.

Abby: I work at the Open Book Cafe, which is in College Library. I don't normally observe the people within the library unless they're coming to get coffee from me. But I recently spent time there sitting and watching those around me just to get a feel of what Robert would do. I didn't do homework or look at my phone. From my observations, people were quiet and minded their own business. Occasionally people would look up if someone were walking right in front of them, there was a loud noise, or they were just

sick of studying. Other than that, nothing exciting or extraordinary would draw Robert here without having homework to do.

Carly: For my observations this week, I watched the *Badger Herald* video of Robert giving students a tour of the tunnels. Having never interacted with Robert personally, it's difficult to form an opinion or put judgement out there about him, but after watching the video, I would say that my opinion of him went from neutral to more positive. Before watching it, I was expecting to hear a deep or scratchy voice, a serious, shy demeanor, and a bit of an awkwardness to his interactions with others. However, this is not what I observed. What I saw was Robert smiling, making jokes, being honest about his love for the tunnels, and being excited about sharing that with others. Being able to put a voice and more of a personality to the face of "Tunnel Bob" helped make him less of an urban legend and more of an actual person for me. He seems like a normal guy who might be kind of awkward but still has a sense of humor. He has something he's really into and likes to teach other people about it, too. He doesn't seem like he's embarrassed about anything or wants to hide anything. Again, it's difficult to confidently say all that after only watching a video, but that's what I got from it.

Emily: At this point in the story, our own firsthand observations of Robert have only reinforced positive perceptions of him. I saw him randomly last Thursday night while I was studying at Union South. If I had to sum up that experience with Robert in one word it would be "indifferent." Robert kept to himself mostly. He would wander around the first floor of the building, alternating between people watching and reading his paper. From what I could see, he never made any attempt to interact with the students around him, and they, in turn, never tried to talk to him either. Everyone was treating Robert as if he were just another anonymous stranger on campus. That's not to say that people were rude or disrespectful, just that everyone was entirely indifferent to his presence. I thought about actually going up to him and seeing if I could start a casual conversation or even record an interview with him, but I decided against it. I had no compelling reason why he should talk to me, and I was afraid of putting him on edge or making him feel uncomfortable when he didn't do anything wrong.

Abby: So after all of these observations, we decided to put them to the test. What would it be like to spend time in these places like Robert does? How would people react? Would it reinforce his creepy urban legend title? We headed to College Library where Tunnel Bob is reported to spend some time and be seen by students. I set down my things and slowly walked around the Open Book area in between tables, around the perimeter, and by the vending machines in the back. I then stood by the big windows on the outside wall for a couple of minutes. For the most part, no one cared. Everyone minded their own business and kept their heads in their books. Sometimes people would look up, and sometimes people noticed after I walked past them a couple times, but they wouldn't give me any dirty or strange looks. This was a good test to conduct, but it was pretty flawed. I'm just a normal, unthreatening college girl who looked like she was either lost or couldn't find a table to study at.

Carly: On the other hand, while finding a table to write this podcast, we did notice a middle-aged man walking through the area without sitting down. No one seemed to notice him or be bothered by his presence.

Abby: But what would it be like for a middle-aged, 6'6" foot man walking through like I did? Would people notice more, unlike they did for me?

[music intensifies to signal a transition, then fades back to the background]

Emily: Overall, after these observations and brief social experiment, we have a little bit of insight into what Robert does. But we still don't know why he does this or what he thinks about it. It really raises questions about us as his audience rather than him as a person. Walking around really is a normal activity, but based on our skewed perspective of him, we see that as a creepy thing to do.

Carly: Again, we come back to the question of, "Why are we so obsessed with him?" We should probably focus instead on our interests and how these have translated through time at UW–Madison rather than how Robert has been an urban legend for so long. Why do we stereotype him so much?

Abby: People didn't notice me, notice the strange middle-aged man we saw at the library, and most likely don't notice Tunnel Bob either. If we don't notice him when he's right in front of us, why do we care so much about what he does with his life? It's almost as if it's a tradition at this school to be creeped out by Tunnel Bob and the urban legend revolving around him.

[*outro music*]