

# Chapter 17: Toward a Feminist Sonic Pedagogy: Research as Listening

By Brandee Easter, York University, Toronto, Ontario  
and Meg M. Marquardt, Mississippi State University

## 7. The Revision by Abby, Carly, and Emily

In their final revision, Abby, Emily, and Carly create a podcast that is focused on members of the UW campus and why they are so concerned with retelling the legend of Grunenwald.

### Transcript

[“Come to Me” by Lily & Madeleine plays]

**Emily:** Does this sound familiar to you? Tall . . . lurking . . . hunchback.

**Carly:** Shadowy . . . shy . . . creepy.

**Abby:** The unions . . . college library . . . the steam tunnels

**Emily:** The silent stalker or omnipresent observer?

**Carly:** An innocent bystander or a threat to personal safety?

**Abby:** If you’re a student or alumni of UW–Madison, the urban legend known as Tunnel Bob probably sprang to mind. While Tunnel Bob is an incredibly well-known figure, little is actually known about him. Our mission is to unravel the mystery that is Tunnel Bob. I am Abby, here with my colleges Emily and Carly, and you’re listening to “Substratum.”

[fade out music]

**Emily:** 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. However, Tunnel Bob is known to frequently spend time wandering these 120-degree tunnels. 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.

**Carly:** Born Robert Grunenwald, this man has become an iconic figure of UW–Madison’s campus since the 1970s. And yet, despite his historic status here in Madison, Robert is an enigma. It seems that the more people know his name, the less they know the person. However, even though so few people personally know Robert, there isn’t a shortage of opinions and assumptions concerning his life- many of which are conflicting.

**Abby:** Research of Robert creates more questions than it answers. Is he homeless? A war vet? A previous UW student? An engineer with a fascination for the steam tunnels? Few have the answers, but many are happy to give their opinion. Through our superficial Google searches, we found many unverified and anonymous claims. These claims, while giving us insight into widely held perceptions also perpetuate unfounded bias concerning Robert.

**Emily:** So, from innocent observer to threatening stalker, where on the spectrum does Robert truly lie? Join us as we try to unravel the mystery that is Tunnel Bob.

[fade in music]

**Abby:** All of this built-up intrigue lead us to our central question: Who is Robert Grunenwald, the man we know as “Tunnel Bob?”

**Carly:** To start out our research, we began very simply. We tried to look him up on social media to see what he has to say about himself. The only accounts we found were fake. More online research brought up an article written a few years ago by the *Badger Herald* and a lot of speculations on various websites.

**Emily:** We also tried looking up a criminal record but didn’t find any publicly accessible information. This interesting to us since the tunnels are officially “off-limits”: We were expecting a vagrancy ticket or trespassing but we found nothing . . .

**Abby:** So, without much solid evidence online to build up Robert’s story, we turned next to the people of Madison to see what they had to say.

**Carly:** So you’ve never actually interacted with him?

**Christian:** No, I’ve just seen him and heard stories about him.

**Carly:** Do you know anyone who’s interacted with him?

**Christian:** I don’t, actually. I don’t. He’s made an urban legend out of himself, something really interesting to talk about and wonder on.

**Carly:** This is Carly, and that was a good friend of mine, Christian, a Madison local who has lived near campus for about 4 years. While he isn’t a student at UW, he is still aware of the mysterious guy who roams the steam tunnels. Like many, he has never personally interacted with the man people call Tunnel Bob, but he has heard many of the common stories about him.

**Carly:** The only other information Christian was able to offer from his perspective was a physical description of Robert, that he looks pretty normal, other than how tall he is. He also did share what others’ opinions of Robert have been.

**Christian:** By word of mouth, it’s seems like more of a scary thing than the actual interviews that were done. It seems more like this dude just wanders, lonely in the steam tunnels. But you see him walking around, he seems like a normal guy. He’s tall. He’s a tall dude. He’s a tall dude, but other than that, he just looks normal, you know, but it’s like, the way that it’s spread about comes across as stereotypical, lurking figure, urban legend sort of thing.

**Emily:** Christian’s perspective is interesting, since he’s not a part of the UW culture. This showed us that the legend of Tunnel Bob extended beyond just the undergrad population.

**Abby:** Like Christian, many UW students have heard about but never interacted with Robert. But one of our own creators, Emily, an undergrad here, has had a firsthand experience with him while she was studying at Union South.

**Emily:** And then, I asked, I had to go to the bathroom, so I asked the people next to me, like, “Hey, can you keep an eye on my stuff?” And he was the one who responded like, “Don’t worry, your stuff is safe with me.” And I was like, “Okay, thanks.” I went to the bathroom, I came back, and everything was fine. All my stuff was still there, and he was still there just hanging out on the windowsill just watching people. And that was, and then he left and said, “Have a good night,” and I was like, “Thanks, you too.”

**Abby:** Another one of our producers, Carly, decided to watch the taped interview done by the *Badger Herald* a couple of years ago. Having never interacted with Robert herself, she was curious to know more about Robert and his demeanor.

**Carly:** 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. It 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

[music]

**Carly:** Throughout weeks of initial research and unanswered questions, we were never able to find the concrete truth about Robert Grunenwald, aka Tunnel Bob. We still have no idea who he is or why he really enjoys spending his time in the steam tunnels underneath campus. Because of this, we started to think that maybe we're looking for the wrong things. Maybe we shouldn't be so concerned with what he does and why he does it, but rather concerned with why we are so fascinated with what some seemingly normal middle-aged man does with his life.

[Regina George, clip from Mean Girls: "Why are you so obsessed with me?"]

**Abby:** Tunnel Bob is rumored to be dangerous, creepy, and scared of women. Yet, when we speak with people who have directly interacted with him, we see that the opposite is proven to be true. For example, one of our own producers, Emily, had a positive encounter with Robert at Union South while studying one night.

**Emily:** Yeah, I saw him randomly one 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 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 to him, 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 him speaking with me, 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.

**Carly:** Along with her casual encounter, in our fourth podcast, we concluded from our tests at College Library and from Christian's interview earlier that no one really notices Tunnel Bob when he's walking around campus. We walked around, stood by the windows, but no one seemed to care. We're just normal college students. But even when another middle-aged man was wandering around the library, no one noticed him either. So, why do we care so much about Tunnel Bob's life story, when we don't even take the time to talk to him or notice him when he's right in front of us?

**Abby:** He has been rumored to do some weird stuff, though. For example, although he seems nice and normal, Emily's friend Josh told us he likes to play games with strangers . . .

**Josh:** They were studying somewhere presumably kind of by E Hall, maybe, and then they got asked to play hide and seek. And they did it.

**Emily:** That seems kinda weird, right? Different people can interpret that situation in different ways. Some people think that's creepy and disturbing like something out of the movie *It*. But others see that as an ode to his playful and lighthearted nature. We as an audience of the Tunnel Bob mystery can't ever really find out his motives behind inviting people to play hide and seek. We can only hope he had the best intentions.

**Carly:** Even disregarding Robert's personality and inherent nature as a person, we can't deny the fact that having him act as some mysterious urban legend adds a little something to our lives. It's freaky, it's baffling, and it's frankly really entertaining. In 1989, a student at UW, Tim Roberts, wrote about all of the notorious people who hang around Madison. He said these people aren't famous or actually contribute to student success at all, but they contribute to the culture of the city and campus. These are the faces you'll remember 10 years after you graduate.

**Abby:** Yet UW–Madison isn't the only college campus with its set of urban legends. Urban legends are popular at just about every university in the world. At the University of Cincinnati, lion statues are told to come alive and growl at night, at Cambridge University, headless ghosts walk around, and at Michigan State University, there's a supposed underground dungeon for satanic rituals.

**Emily:** I'll stick with our urban legend of a creepy old guy over satanic rituals any day.

**Carly:** Overall, maybe Tunnel Bob, innocent or creepy, is such a big deal to us because it adds to our culture. He makes our lives on campus a little more interesting, and that's why we're so obsessed with what he does.

[*"Obsessed" by Mariah Carey plays*]

**Abby:** After weeks of research that began with a desire to know more about an urban legend on our campus, our focus turned and made us wonder why we are so obsessed with him. We are now left asking ourselves what it says about us that we have spent decades continuing to talk about and be fascinated by him.

**Emily:** On top of passing his legend along from class to class throughout the years, we have added to his story with false accusations, assumptions, and rumors. While some of these are innocent and mean nothing, such as the possibility of Robert being a UW alumni or engineer who enjoys spending time in the tunnels, many can be offensive and even dangerous.

**Carly:** By assuming that someone has a mental illness because they are eccentric, look different, keep to themselves or have a unique fascination we are perpetuating stereotypes and stigmas about people who actually do have a mental illness. Additionally, when we accuse someone of being a stalker or being dangerous, we are damaging their character and affecting the ways others may see or treat them.

**Abby:** In our time researching Robert, we have been given time to reflect on what the effects of the stories we have told about him may be and why we believe it is important for others to do the same. This applies to so much more than just Robert Grunenwald. Spreading false information, regardless of the severity, can have real implications in

people's lives. In a world where we have the ability to share information rapidly and widely, this is important to be aware of.

**Emily:** Not only is it important to think about the effects that these false stories may have but also to think about why we tell them. Do we start rumors that we know aren't true just to make our own stories and ourselves seem more interesting? If so, why do we do this?

**Carly:** Maybe one thing we do know about Robert and his story is that there's a lot we can learn from it.

*[fade out music]*