

Subverting the Myth of the Bearded Lady: Jennifer Miller and Circus Amok

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“I live in a very liminal place. Liminal means: an ‘inbetween place.’ It means ‘in a doorway, dawn or dusky.’ It’s a lovely place. In the theater, it’s when the lights go out and before the performance begins.” –Jennifer Miller from *Juggling Gender*

Bodies possess narratives, stories both told and hidden. When anomalies mark the body with difference, the visual stories it offers viewers become dichotomous and electric. Such was the draw of the freak shows of the 19th and 20th centuries, a simultaneous mixture of awe and dread. The body of physical difference became spectacle, labeled as Other, a deviant subject which actively drew the normative gaze. The lineage of framing bodies of difference as freaks, exposing them to the voyeuristic gaze of hegemony, is lengthy. While authors like cultural historian Robert Bogdan and cultural critic Leslie Fiedler examine the social and cultural connotations of freak shows before and during the P.T. Barnum era, it is also vital to examine contemporary applications of freakery. Through such unpacking, we can begin to unravel the culturally sedimented applications of the word freak; we can understand and then undermine its potential to marginalize.

This paper will discuss the work and life of Jennifer Miller, a multidisciplinary artist, clown, and self-identified woman with a beard. Through her daily life and her

performances in Circus Amok, a circus she founded in 1989 and currently directs, Miller challenges the historical connotations of freak shows; hers is a project of resistance. Though she functions within the trope of the circus as spectacle, Miller inverts the mythic image of the bearded lady and, by extension, the genealogies of essential femininity and the normative image of womanhood.

When Miller's beard started to grow, she was seventeen. Initially, the beard became the center of discomfort for her, a stigmatic presence she did not voice to her friends. Miller quickly realized how difficult it was to get a job as a woman who was intentionally transgressing feminine norms. Seeking to remedy the situation, upon her grandmother's insistence, Miller shaved her beard and tried electrolysis. In *Juggling Gender*, a documentary about Miller's life and art, she declares that the act of removing hair from her face "felt like mutilation, a losing battle" (*Juggling Gender*). The consequent decision to maintain her beard positioned Miller as a non-normative woman. As a result, she was forced to negotiate the multifaceted aspects of hair: its transformative powers and, simultaneously, its problematic, cultural connotations.

Hair's ability to marginalize the subject points to the power of transgressive hair, what Susan Schnur, editor of Jewish feminist magazine *Lilith*, defines as "hair on a female that grows on male-staked territory (mustaches, underarm hair, hairy legs)--[that] unsettles [male/female] categories" (8). Culture constructs these spaces as male-staked. Just as a skirt is not inherently female, facial hair (mustache/beard) is not

inherently male. Rather, hegemony uses the mustache/beard, underarm hair, and hairy legs as signifiers for maleness. In this way, hair is power. Its socially coded myth is a vital part of the bearded lady's, and by extension, Jennifer Miller's, subjectivity. The possession of transgressive hair creates what Miller refers to as "beard anxiety" (Juggling Gender), an essential aspect of what originally created interest in the bearded ladies of the 19th and 20th centuries. Miller is met with a similarly cautious bewilderment as she walks in her home New York City.

When Miller speaks, the clash of a feminine voice and a masculine sexual signifier creates confusion; Miller's body becomes a space for the viewers' disorientation. Spaces hegemony socially codes as female, such as women's clothing sections in department stores or women's restrooms, become particularly hostile spaces for Miller. "It's hard, the bathroom scene," Miller reveals. "I've been stopped. I've had to say, Yes, I'm a woman" (Smith C3). During public encounters in bathrooms and dressing rooms, Miller's body immediately becomes spectacle. She represents a middle ground where hegemonic standards and transgressions collide. In order to fully understand why Miller's beard prompts revulsion and why we should view Miller's keeping of her beard as a subversive act, we first need to examine the genealogy of the bearded lady, the ways in which freak shows historically framed her.

The female and male sexual signifiers that marked the bearded lady of the 19th and 20th centuries framed her in a visual contradiction. On account of the imbalance, it

became crucial for showmen to locate the archetypal bearded lady in the context of essential femininity; we can also read this as the desire to control the Other. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, author of *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, makes reference to this desire stating that “Bodies that are disabled [or viewed as physically different] can also seem dangerous because they are perceived as out of control” (37). Hegemony consequently viewed the bearded lady as problematic, as out of control, because she negotiated male sexual signifiers upon her female body. For this reason, her physical difference was seen as a threat to hegemony’s artificial rigidity.

One way in which hegemony renegotiated the bearded lady’s physical difference was through the use of highly staged photographs called cabinet cards. These small photo cards, sold as souvenirs in the 1860’s, often depicted the bearded lady in traditional Victorian dresses, her long hair, a status of her femininity, combed at her shoulders (Bogdan). Robert Bogdan author of *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, states that bearded ladies “typically appeared in straightforward status-enhancing motifs—except for the beards, these women represented the quintessence of refined respectable womanhood” (224). Annie Jones, a bearded lady who performed in P.T. Barnum’s traveling sideshows, was often photographed under the directed gaze of American photographer Charles Eisenmann (Nickell 151). Eisenmann photographed and posed Jones, along with other bearded ladies, an act which speaks to the rigidity of the cabinet cards. The photographs served as a heavily

regulated space, one where hegemony's hand could enter and manipulate. However, the cabinet cards ultimately did not present the women as "the quintessence of refined respectable womanhood." The cabinet cards created a visual juxtaposition between the women's beards and the dresses they wore, rendering the bearded lady as the antithesis of femininity. While the bearded lady looked like a traditional Victorian woman in her dress, her beard was made all the more visible as a stigmatic mark, one which reaffirmed her marginal status. Rather than attesting to her femininity, the gender ambiguity portrayed in the cabinet cards evoked terror. The juxtaposition struck an even deeper apprehension because the bearded lady represented, in every other respect, normative femininity.

The cabinet cards also contextualized the bearded lady as the hyper-feminine wife (Bogdan). The majority of these photos presented bearded ladies positioned next to their husbands. Subsequently, the bearded ladies were also presented as mothers, another marker of essential femininity (Bogdan). Bogdan introduces Madam Clofullia, a bearded lady, who before she began performing was examined by a doctor who stated that "her breasts [were] ... large and fair, and strictly characteristic of the female" (226). Such authorial confirmation points to the inherent power structure that arises when hegemony subjects bodies to medical verification, when they are forcefully placed under the scrutiny of the normative, medical gaze. For instance, when Madam Clofullia gave birth in 1851, her manager wanted the doctor to "provide an affidavit of the birth and a statement that the child was indeed hers and that she had a genuine 'abundant beard'"

(Bogdan 226). Such an act points to the weight and the need of the scientific, medical, and male voice to confirm the legitimacy of a physical anomaly. There was a need for confirmation that Madam Clofullia was able to perform the essentially feminine act of giving birth despite possessing a beard.

The need to define difference and aberrancy as evidenced by the cabinet cards of the 1860s still shadows Miller as she walks through the streets of New York City. It is a liminal positioning that renders her body at a threshold, an in-between space fraught with constant negotiation. Miller's encounter with strangers on the street is closely related to the dichotomous relationship Andrea Stulman Dennett states would historically occur between audience members and bearded ladies:

Sometimes patrons were allowed to touch the limbs of Fat Ladies or pull the whiskers of Bearded Ladies. It was deeply arousing to Victorians to touch a strange woman in a legitimate, respectable setting, and it was a tantalizing and disturbing sight for other spectators, especially adolescents. A wondrously titillating dialectic emerged, in which performers were alluring as well as repulsive. (323)

We can understand this pull towards bodily difference as a way for onlookers to validate their own normalcy; the bearded lady served as a point of contrast (Garland-Thomson 65). The attraction to the beard, in such a situation, is complex. People can be drawn to it simply for its difference, for its acute misplacement on a female face. On the other hand, the allure of witnessing the Other is also enticing. Within this interaction, bodily difference itself becomes public. Miller's beard, similar to the pregnant stomach, becomes a space accessible for public touch without personal consent. For example, as Miller is interviewed in the documentary *Juggling Gender*, a man suddenly walks up to Miller and rubs his face to hers. He wants to know "if [the beard is] real" (*Juggling Gender*). Such a moment is reminiscent of the Victorians' fascination towards the

bearded lady; both the Victorians and the onlookers in New York want to know if the beard is real. They want to touch it and they are in awe of the dichotomy. It is the normative subject's power to control the gaze which situates the bearded lady in passivity; she is at the mercy of the normative voyeur.

Miller, however, subverts the passive, entrapped position of the mythic bearded lady. When people on the street confront her and ask, "What is it that you are?" (Juggling Gender) Miller says that she engages people, asking them to discern for themselves what they are seeing. In this way, Miller intervenes in the historicized interaction between normative culture and the Other. Even questioning the position of the Other as oddity is a subversive act, one which immediately unsettles the once sedimented power structure between bearded ladies and their onlookers. The power of the onlooker is dislocated and lessoned once Miller forces them to answer their own question. This action removes Miller from passivity, allowing her to diverge from the docile position freak shows and hegemony typically used to restrict bearded ladies.

Even a century after the end of the Victorian era, the connotations of the bearded lady, her social stigmas and the discourse of freakery that surrounded her, are still present. "The Thief of Womanhood: Women's Experience of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome," a study published in 2002, points to such a presence. The study interviews thirty women with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), a condition which, among other symptoms, causes the growth of excess body hair. What is unique about Kitzinger and Willmott's

study is their application of a feminist lens in recording the experiences of these women. Specifically, Kitzinger and Willmott examine “how women with PCOS negotiate their identities as women” (350). However, the language that the interviewees use to describe themselves suggests that the myth of the bearded lady is still being perpetuated. According to Kitzinger and Willmott, many of the women use “freak” or “freakishness” as self-identifying words:

This was a repeated theme throughout virtually every interview, with ‘freakishness’ consistently represented as a failure to conform to the norms of ‘proper’ womanhood or femininity. From the range of different symptoms these women discussed, the most distressing emerged as body and facial hair, menstrual irregularity, and infertility—it was these three symptoms above all others which were consistently associated with ‘freakishness.’ (352)

The presence and recurrent use of the words “freak” and “freakishness” suggests that the social perception of people with physical anomalies is still heavily linked to the stigma and discourse of freak shows. Within the context of this study, a sign which marks gender as ambiguous positions itself as freakery. More specifically, the rhetoric used in Kitzinger and Willmott’s study exemplifies the way in which normative culture privileges women who align themselves with the mandates of essential femininity. Within this social restriction, not being able to bear children and/or possessing excessive body and facial hair marks a woman as having an anomalous, aberrant body. As a 21st century depiction of the bearded lady’s mythology, while the women in this study do not overtly subvert the myth of Otherness and deviancy, Kitzinger and Willmott did identify that “There was some muted and inconsistent resistance to the socially construct[ed] notion of ‘normal’ women” (359). Their study points to how the notion of “freakishness” “poses a fundamental challenge to the social construction of

‘womanhood’ and to the notions of ‘femininity’” (Kitzinger and Willmott 359). As we shall soon see, it is here where Miller and Circus Amok’s queer tactics enter as active protest. They enter into a rooted binary logic, offering a more inclusive way of existing; they challenge the rigid boundaries of man and woman.

Before beginning her process of subversion, Miller briefly worked within the context of a traditional freak show, though she actively complicated the role. Before co-founding Circus Amok, Miller performed at the Coney Island Sideshow in Brooklyn, New York as Zenobia, a fire-eating and juggling bearded lady (Juggling Gender). In that role, she kept the traditional freak show moniker of “bearded lady.” When asked about her experiences directly engaging with the freak show archetype, Miller offers that “it gives you a context in which to look at how the bearded lady was contextualized as a performer” (Juggling Gender). Miller’s opinion about working at the Coney Island sideshow, however, is complex as she identifies the sideshow as a place where she could find work without being forced to shave her beard. The line between maintaining personhood and being spectacle, then, becomes very blurred, a truly marginal space of give and take.

The fact that Miller sought employment at the Coney Island Sideshow because of a lack of work in a traditional social setting is an innate part of the bearded lady’s mythology. Work in the freak shows served as a central source of income that people with physical differences were forced to accept (Bogdan). However, Miller’s participation at Coney

Island differs from that of the bearded lady's. When referencing her tenure at the sideshow, performance studies scholar and artist Mark Sussman reveals that Miller "takes firm control of the content of her act. Her beard is never simply an object of display" (264). By determining the parameters of her own performance, Miller rewrites the passive position of the bearded lady. By extension, she also undoes the control of the showman. By performing in the sideshow, Miller interacts with social constructions of Otherness, with a location that gives normative culture the power to gaze. However, Miller's specific use of language is central in understanding how she self-identifies with, and how she differs from, the bearded lady's narrative.

The moment Miller challenges the linguistic lineage of the bearded lady is when she identifies herself as a woman with a beard. Rephrasing the moniker "bearded lady" returns agency to Miller's body. She is no longer objectified or defined by a monolithic name, one which carries stigmatic connotations. By reversing the order of the phrase, Miller finds new entry points into the mythology of the bearded lady. She dislocates a form of identification which is primarily based on sexual signifiers. As a woman with a beard, the beard as signifier becomes secondary to the subject "woman." Miller's revision creates a space that vocalizes linguistic subversions; here, she challenges the historical connotations of the bearded lady. With this inversion, Miller engages with Judith Butler's assertion that while it may be impossible to exist outside of power relations, subversions can occur; they can, indeed, effect change (42). In continuation of Kitzinger and Willmott's study, Miller interrogates hegemony's construction of the

labels “bearded lady,” “freak,” and “freakishness.” Thus, “Woman with a beard” serves as an embattled voice, one which reappropriates the negative, social connotations associated with transgressive hair.

To further understand the potency of this rhetorical gesture, we need to examine the symbolic relevance of hair. In *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society*, Anthony Synnott argues that “Hair is one of our most powerful symbols [...] powerful first because it is physical and therefore extremely personal, and second because although personal it is also public, rather than private” (103). Continuing to examine the hegemonically dictated impulses surrounding hair, its symbolism and power, Synnott states that “What is beautiful for one gender is ugly for the opposite sex--the young man’s glory is a woman’s shame” (111). The conventional notion that sexual signifiers such as short hair and facial hair are associated with men, while long hair and a smooth face are associated with women, demands gender conformity. Anyone who transgresses the binaries of normative culture is viewed as deviant. Hair transgressions are seen as doubly problematic if they occur on the face, rather than on the scalp. Synnott suggests that the face, in particular, “symbolizes the self, and signifies different facets of the self” (73). The fact that Miller intentionally uses her face to perpetuate gender hybridity is a powerful tactic, one which re-writes the authority of compulsive normality, the hegemonically determined image of “woman.” Miller has a choice: she can remove her beard with a battery of expensive and uncomfortable hair removal options, or she can keep it. Her choice to keep the beard despite the socially

constructed norms of transgressive hair and the public element of shame is extremely compelling. In the face of the bearded lady's well-documented mythology, Miller empowers the body of physical difference. She advocates for an alternative to accepting the dictations of normative culture. By embracing her entire body, regardless of the social disciplining that accompanies transgressive hair, Miller dissolves restrictive boundaries. She creates a space where bodies can exist without regressive standards.

Once Miller left the Coney Island Sideshow and founded Circus Amok in 1989 (Sussman), she reinstated her autonomy as a performer and as a woman with a beard. As a director and performer in Circus Amok, Miller's actions create a location which allows her to reinstate agency in a body with physical difference. Circus Amok¹ is a free of charge, alternative, outdoor circus without animals that is "comprised of seven ring-performers, [and] a [seven] member live band" (www.circusamok.org). In addition to these factors, the name Circus Amok also strategically points to the subversive landscape Miller's circus seeks to create. Among the many definitions of amok, one will find aspects of confusion, frenzy, and tremendous activity. It can be argued that in order for new ideas to emerge, one must first be confused about one's old ideas: confusion permits questioning. When we combine the notion of confusion with frenzy and tremendous activity, we can see how the name Circus Amok is very fitting. Traditionally, freak shows were meant to expose the margins to the center, serving as a space where the dominant, hegemonic gaze witnessed the Other. The normative subject was to pass judgement, to affirm their own normality in contrast to the bodies of physical difference

(Garland-Thomson 31). Circus Amok, however, reverses this dichotomy, creating a space of frenzied transgressions. Specifically, Circus Amok dismantles the tenets of essential femininity, and masculinity, as it normalizes transgressive hair. Miller startles audiences as she presents visual contradictions. By creating an alternate space, she frames the divergence from normativity as possible. Circus Amok becomes a place which allows for frenzied re-growth: the interrogation and repositioning of the images of gender, hair, and power.

Miller continues to further reposition the image of the bearded lady in the ways in which she subverts traditional manifestations of power. In 1994, Miller began to take the circus into parks and community spaces, performing for a wider and more diverse audience (Sussman 265), a gesture which signals her control over the often patriarchal trope of the circus. By being in charge of the circus, by creating it and maintaining it, Miller's role as a woman with a beard diverges from the narrative which fixed the bearded lady in restrictions. During the P.T. Barnum era, the bearded lady was dependent on her showman (Bogdan). Miller, however, is her own showman. Circus Amok affords Miller with the freedom and agency to re-inscribe the myth of the bearded lady, and her image, with rebellious independence.

Speaking to Circus Amok's defiant nature, community arts professional Susan Monagan defines Circus Amok as having a "lesbian, feminist, circus image" (n.p.), an assignment that most traditional circuses, particularly freak shows, did not and do not have. Further,

Mark Sussman, a performance studies theorist, names Circus Amok a queer circus. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of queer can serve as an effective guidepost here, especially when navigating the labels afforded to Circus Amok. For Kosofsky Sedgwick, "queer" is a space which disrupts hegemonic and linear interpretations of gender, a central foundation of both Circus Amok and Miller's project. Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies queer as, "The open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlays, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituents of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (8). Miller's decision to keep her beard can be read as her attempt to fracture the monolithic image of essential femininity. For Miller, her gender and sexuality exist in a middle ground, a space which allows for the existence of multiple voices and experiences. She carefully agitates hegemony's image of femininity, creating what Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as gaps, an "open mesh of possibilities" (8).

Circus Amok's costumes, in particular, also identify the inherent dissonance that exists in the artificial monoliths of essential femininity and masculinity. On stage, men enter wearing dresses, bras, and wigs while Miller usually wears a dress and reveals her beard openly and freely. During some skits, she will insert a balled sock into her pants, harnessing the energy associated with the phallus. Such an act challenges the viewers' expectations as she presents an additional, displaced sexual signifier for negotiation and consumption. There is undeniably an element of humor attached to the act as each item being used—wig, bra, dress, phallus—is a powerful signifier that Miller intentionally

misplaces. Such reversals serve to challenge the normative positions of each item. Perhaps what is most transgressive in this reversal is that Miller, and by extension Circus Amok, suggests that these sexual signifiers can detach: they are not fixed. Within the circus, dress does not belong to the feminine and phallus does not belong to the masculine. It is through the use of costumes that gender is manipulated and altered demonstrating its innate performativity and artificially (Butler).

Miller's choice to take the stage wearing a dress with her beard exposed further embodies the visual fragmentations of the feminine ideal. While it may appear upon first glance that Miller is affirming her femininity similar to how showmen presented bearded ladies in cabinet cards and during freak shows, this is not the case. Miller makes a strategic choice in wearing dresses publicly. Although she wears a culturally sanctioned marker of femininity, Miller preforms contrary to the mythic bearded lady, an act which at once shatters the passivity and restrictiveness the dress imposed upon women like Jones and Madam Clofullia. Here, Miller's use of the dress acts in defiance of essential femininity. She demands the viewer re-negotiates their expectations of what constitutes the image of a woman. Not only does such an act create disparities for viewers, but it simultaneously "normalizes" difference (Monagan n.p.). Circus Amok embraces the marginalized body, plays with it, and presents it to audiences in parks. Such an act makes the body of physical difference familiar, bringing what is hegemonically deemed "freakery" into a public sphere. Circus Amok's desire to portray difference reverses Garland-Thomson's assertion that public viewings of the Other affirm one's own

normality. Miller's circus destabilizes the existence of a sterile, normative environment, creating a place where viewers can experience, and become familiar with, difference. The hope is that such exposure will foster a greater acceptance of the non-normative body, thus challenging hegemony's outright rejection and labeling of the Other.

While Circus Amok engages in the trope of the circus, Miller expands its traditional image, connecting the circus with political and social dimensions; Miller sutures activism to her productions. According to the Circus Amok homepage, an assemblage of both elements, social justice and performance, is prevalent in each act: "the knife-throwers are reciting statistics of the AIDS crisis, the stilts are dancing through the minefields of gentrification, the women are lifting the men into the final amok pyramid, and audiences are laughing and thinking" (www.circusamok.org). Learning while being entertained can be a strategic way to induce social consciousness. Rather than serving a dry recitation of facts, Circus Amok creates an interactive way for the public body to learn about hegemonically marginalized issues. Circus Amok enters directly and unabashedly into a public space to engage with, and challenge, normative culture.

Some may argue that Circus Amok does not challenge the myth and image of the bearded lady because it is replicating the elements of spectacle and performance so linked with freak shows. Miller and the members of her circus do, for example, perform in costume as the bearded lady did. While it is unclear how all the audiences of Circus Amok react to the performance, whether or not they view the acts and those performing

as oddities or freaks, the Circus Amok mission statement stresses that “After the show, as we pack up we talk some more with the crowds. The kids who earlier had questioned the who, where, and why of us are now helping us pack” (www.circusamok.org). This act of voluntary inclusion speaks to Circus Amok’s ability to sever the trope of gazing established at most 19th and 20th century freak shows: come, gawk, and leave. While they may attend to witness the Other out of curiosity, the fact that audience members end their attendance with action serves as a powerful gesture. Voluntary audience involvement at Circus Amok’s shows speaks to the opening of dialogue and interaction, collaborative indications that were absent during the freak shows. Further, it establishes that the power inherent in the gaze, in the act of seeing, is multidirectional.

Such a re-reading of power also extends to Circus Amok’s treatment of spectacle. While Miller and the circus are spectacles as they appear on stage, in the middle of a park, the reactions noted on their homepage speak to a more complex reading of spectacle. The spectacle is invoked for the purpose of igniting questions. Too often, freak shows have used the physical difference of performers as spectacle to dehumanize the Other and to satisfy the gaze of the normative subject. The natural impulse to look upon difference has always drawn audiences to freak shows, and while there is nothing wrong with this impulse, those controlling the gaze can pervert the desire to look, turning the act of gazing into one which seeks to assert hierarchical divides. Miller calls upon this proclivity to look; however, she repositions the use of the spectacle to humanize the audience, rather than dehumanize the freak.

Miller's work with Circus Amok and the ways in which her body performs non-normativity unsettle the original connotations that the beard, as a misplaced sexual signifier, possesses. It is her engagement with gender and performance which most forcefully disrupts the liminal positionality that hegemony affords the non-normative body. Miller's treatment of the beard creates a space which transgresses regulatory borders. She was once told that perhaps high progesterone was the cause of her abnormal hair growth. However, in response to the appearance of dark brown hair on her chin, Miller offered, "I don't think of it as a problem, so I'm not looking for a cause" (Smith C3). In such a repossessed space, Miller positions the beard as natural, as that which does not inherently belong to one sex or the other. Such a gesture disrupts hegemony's grasp on what constitutes appropriate femininity. With the naturalization of the beard, femininity, as a monolith, loses its stability.

By fracturing the hegemonic position of the beard, Miller also reveals the ways in which the beard, as a displaced sexual signifier, is used as a policing tool. In order to maintain the borders of essential femininity, Madame Clofullia and the bearded ladies of the P.T. Barnum era, were rendered to the margins. Hegemony marked these women as deviant, to serve as a contrast to the normative female body. By marking the beard as transgressive and toxic to essential femininity, dominant culture policed the bodies of women who possessed facial hair. However, by not removing her beard, by renouncing the dominant image of woman, Miller refuses to be policed by the constructions of

transgressive hair. Here rests her amendment to the bearded lady's mythology: the opportunity for a woman once manipulated by hegemony to create a narrative of her own making.

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ⁱ Circus Amok last performed in 2008. Although their website does not specify why they have not performed, a lack of funding is one plausible reason for their absence.