

THE PERSONAL BREAST IS POLITICAL: DOCUMENTARIES ABOUT WOMEN, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND CANCER

by JoAnne Lehman

BUSTING OUT: A FILM THAT WILL CHALLENGE HOW YOU THINK ABOUT BREASTS. 57 mins. Written, directed, and produced by Francine Strickwerda & Laurel Spellman Smith. Stir It Up Productions, LLC, 2004. (U.S. release date: 2006.) Distributed by Bullfrog Films, P.O. Box 149, Oley, PA 19547; phone: (800) 543-3764; website: www.bullfrogfilms.com. VHS (ISBN 1-59458-253-X) or DVD-R (ISBN 1-59458-254-8): Purchase, \$250.00; rent: \$85.00. (“Reduced rates for activists and grassroots groups. Please inquire.”)

TOXIC BUST: CHEMICALS AND BREAST CANCER. 41 mins. By Megan Siler. Plumb Pictures, 2006. Distributed by Bullfrog Films, P.O. Box 149, Oley, PA 19547; phone: (800) 543-3764; website: www.bullfrogfilms.com. VHS (ISBN 1-59458-518-0) or DVD-R (1-59458-519-9): Purchase, \$225.00; rent: \$65.00. (“Reduced rates for activists and grassroots groups. Please inquire.”)

RACHEL'S DAUGHTERS: SEARCHING FOR THE CAUSES OF BREAST CANCER. 107 mins. By Allie Light and Irving Saraf. Produced with Nancy Evans, 1997. Distributed by Women Make Movies, 462 Broadway, Suite 500, New York NY 10013; website: www.wmm.com. Order No. W99582. Universities, colleges, & institutions: VHS or DVD purchase: \$295.00. VHS rental: \$90.00. 16mm rental: \$195.00. VHS or DVD purchase for K-12 schools, public libraries & select groups: \$89.00.

EXPOSURE: ENVIRONMENTAL LINKS TO BREAST CANCER. 53 mins. Directed by Francine Zuckerman. Produced by Martha Butterfield & Francine Zuckerman, 1998. Accompanying resource guide, **TAKING ACTION FOR A HEALTHY FUTURE**, 2002. Distributed by Women's Healthy Environments Network (WHEN), 24 Mercer Street, Suite 101, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1H3, Canada; phone: (416) 928-0880; website: www.whenvironments.ca. VHS (or PAL/SECAM) or DVD purchase: individual \$32.00; community partner \$50.00; institution \$107.00; plus shipping and handling.

HEART OF THE SEA, KAPOLIOKA 'EHUKAI: A FILM PORTRAIT OF HAWAIIAN LEGEND RELI SUNN. 54 mins. By Lisa Denker and Charlotte Lagarde. Swell Cinema, 2002. Distributed by Women Make Movies, 462 Broadway, Suite 500, New York NY 10013; website: www.wmm.com. Order No. W03818. Universities, colleges, & institutions: VHS or DVD purchase: \$275.00; VHS rental: \$90.00. VHS or DVD purchase for K-12 schools, public libraries & select groups: \$89.00. Home video: VHS or DVD purchase: \$24.95.

In the late 1960s, for my first-ever research paper in the eighth grade, I chose the topic “The Effects of Pesticide Use.” I’m not sure what led me to select that, but it certainly grabbed my attention and shaped my young-idealist attitudes — especially when I came across Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring*, which became my main reference.

I don’t think I even knew of the existence of breast cancer back then, and I don’t recall thinking about it

when I read *Silent Spring*. My thirteen-year-old sensitivities were more easily engaged by the poor birds that got sick or could not reproduce after DDT exposure. I even cut up (to my mother’s dismay) a new issue of *National Geographic* for its pictures of non-viable duck or goose eggs whose condition was attributed to pesticides in their habitat. And I worried about the pet cats (including my own, of course) who might suffer harm from eating diseased birds or insects.

As a feminist thirty-seven years later, I have plenty of reasons to be interested not only in breast cancer, and not only in environmental hazards, but in their connection to each other. As I contemplate my health risk factors, wonder about the optimal frequency of mammograms, and see cancer touch the lives of — it seems — everyone I know, I’m thinking again about the alarms Carson sounded, especially since there’s footage of her in several of the films under review here. I didn’t

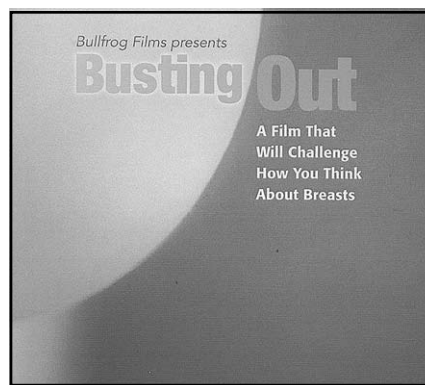
know back in the 1960s that Carson battled breast cancer herself, but she did; in fact, she died of it only two years after the publication of *Silent Spring*.

Only three of these five documentary films are mainly about breast cancer and its possible environmental causes. Any or all of those three (*Exposure*, *Rachel's Daughters*, and *Toxic Bust*) could serve well in classrooms or in community groups to spark discussion, further study, and activism; and there is overlap among all three in terms of facts presented, questions raised, and experts interviewed. The more philosophical *Busting Out*, on the other hand, tackles the larger — not incompatible — topic of the “culture of the breast” in Western (primarily U.S.) society. And *Heart of the Sea*, although it does feature a woman who battled breast cancer and gives a nod to the possibility of environmental links, is more of a tribute to an exceptional woman athlete as well as a moving introduction to the culture — especially surfing culture — of Hawai'i.

Yet there is no reason all of these films — or at least one of the three environmental ones, plus both of the others — could not be used effectively in a college or high-school course — perhaps one on women's health — that includes a segment on women and breast cancer, or in a community group or an older girls' club setting. I can imagine an instructor or group leader using *Busting Out* to introduce the topic of Western women's breasts and their cultural and personal meanings, including the meaning of the loss of breasts (and lives of women) to cancer; then following with one or more of the “environmental cause” explorations; and finally wrapping up with the inspiring *Heart of the Sea*.

All of the films under review here are available on DVD, making showing simple both for groups and for indi-

viduals, and fast-forwarding, pausing, and reversing completely easy. Some of them suffer from sound-synchronization problems, with voices lagging annoyingly behind lip movement onscreen. This is most noticeable the more footage is devoted to lengthy face-on footage of “talking heads” (e.g., in *Exposure*); but less of a problem if voices are projected over other visual footage instead of the speakers' mouths being shown moving the whole time they're talking.



There's “a lot of heat around breasts” in America today, says the narrator of *Busting Out*. She illustrates this dramatically as she visits the set of a radio show whose shock-host's mission seems to be to fetishize women's breasts, and who believes women have an *obligation* to “flash their racks” to leering, yelling, boob-infatuated men who throng to the studio and tune in to the show in record numbers. This host, by the way, answers criticisms that he objectifies women with a rather strange argument: “It's amazing that we have no problem with women objectifying a man's ability to make a living!” (Huh?)

This segment of the film, provocative though it is, is not the primary focus. Laurel Spellman Smith opens with memories of losing her own mother to breast cancer when she (Laurel) was a young girl, of not being told about it or encouraged to talk about it either then with her mother or with her be-

reaved father throughout her growing-up years, and of her resulting negative feeling that breasts were “like luggage”: “boobs of doom” that “make me vulnerable.”

Then, after the shock-radio segment described above, Spellman Smith interviews women who've had breast-reduction and breast-augmentation surgery, talks about pornography, and provides the anthropological perspective that “in most of the world, breasts are *not* sexualized.” There's a lot of information about breastfeeding and the corporate interests that have discouraged it now and in the past (in this country, for instance, dairy producers lobbied against the practice), and about how our culture has dealt with the topic of girls coming of age and developing breasts; and there's a segment in which an enlightened modern mom goes bra-shopping with her only-slightly-embarrassed preteen daughter.

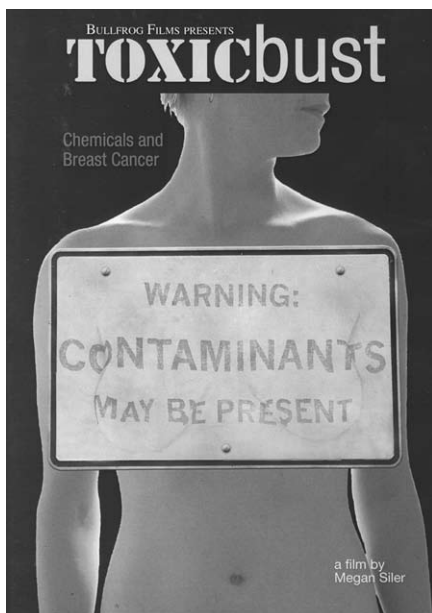
And then Spellman Smith moves back to the topic of breast cancer, with footage of writer Deena Metzger boldly baring the tattooed site of her mastectomy for a photo shoot in 1980; with criticism of corporate culture's “shop for the cure” tactic of marketing products related to cancer and thus “softening” the image of the problem; and with discussion of how “we've not had the will...to look at the environmental exposure” in investigating the causes of the disease. She also interviews members of Seattle's “Burly Q,” a burlesque troupe that features empowered women of all sizes and shapes playing with their audiences and celebrating real breasts and bodies “on their own terms.”

The filmmaker ends with more about her own personal struggle with being a woman with breasts. “I'm ready to break free,” she says finally, sitting covered up on the beach. “They [breasts] are now much more about life than death [for me].” Facing away from

the camera, she removes her top and walks down the shore.

Of the three films focused specifically on the environmental causes of cancer, *Toxic Bust*, as the shortest (41 minutes), might fit most easily into a class session; it also has the most recent release date (2006), and is available in both English and Spanish. *Exposure* (1998) is inexpensive, comes with a useful printed resource guide, and is available in seven languages. And *Rachel's Daughters* (1997), the longest at 107 minutes, may offer the greatest number of facts and “talking heads” (experts being interviewed), as well as the most dramatic “punch.”

All three of the films address concerns about lifetime exposure to synthetic estrogenic compounds that are introduced through pesticides, plastics, household products, industrial solvents, and other chemicals. All identify their “talking heads” with names, credentials, and organizational affiliations.



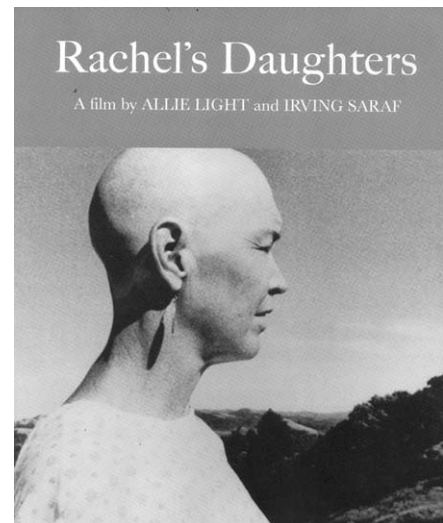
Toxic Bust opens and closes with a beach scene in which a young girl is making “sand breasts” that eventually get washed away by the sea. This docu-

mentary is framed on both ends by the narrator’s concern and reflections about her own breast lump and subsequent diagnosis, and about the risky environment her young daughter is inheriting. In between, many facts and statistics are displayed onscreen (e.g., “Less than 10% of breast cancer cases are hereditary”) — a nice feature, since it can be hard to assimilate information solely from hearing it. We hear from medical and scientific experts as well as activists and women with cancer, and we learn in particular about two parts of the U.S. — Cape Cod and California’s Bay Area — as well as a high-tech industry (IBM), where rates of cancer are unusually high and are suspected to be connected to environmental contaminants: pesticides in Massachusetts; a Superfund toxic waste site (a now-closed naval shipyard) in Bayview/Hunter’s Point in San Francisco, California; and industrial chemicals in the supposedly “clean” computer industry.

Experts interviewed in *Toxic Bust* include Gina Solomon, M.D., M.P.H., of the Natural Resources Defense Council; Julia Brody, Ph.D., executive director of the Silent Spring Institute; Philip J. Landrigan, M.D., from Mt. Sinai School of Medicine; Karen Pierce, from the Bayview Hunters Point Health and Environmental Assessment Task Force; Amanda Hawes, plaintiffs’ attorney in the worker lawsuit against IBM; and Robert Harrison, M.D., M.P.H., clinical professor of occupational health at University of California-San Francisco.

Main topics explored:

- Lifetime exposure to estrogen, particularly synthetic estrogenic compounds in consumer products, dry cleaning products, pesticides, etc.
- Proliferation since WWII of untested chemicals, and the unfair burden of proof on cancer victims to prove harm caused by the chemicals in use, instead of on



chemical industries to prove chemicals are safe before being used

- Differences in breast cancer rates and mortality rates between white women and women of color; connections with chemical and radiation exposure
- Concentrated exposure to carcinogens during fetal development and breastfeeding, as well as other childhood exposure
- Problems inherent in the way cancer research is funded (weighted toward treatment, which can make money for pharmaceutical companies, rather than cause and prevention)

I find *Rachel's Daughters* very powerful dramatically as well as in terms of the numbers of experts consulted and facts presented. This video runs 107 minutes, longer by far than either of the other two environmental ones, but it should not be a problem to split up the viewing between two or more class sessions. Indeed, one would probably want to pause all of these films at various times during the showing to assimilate information and discuss points. On the other hand, the sheer length here could make *Rachel's*

Daughters either too overwhelming or too tedious for some audiences.

The film's title is, of course, in recognition of Rachel Carson. The "daughters" are a group of women with breast cancer who come together to investigate possible causes, dividing up topics and traveling to interview scientists, doctors, and other experts. (One of the women dies before the film is completed, and several of the others are suffering recurrences of their cancer by the final scene, adding to the dramatic impact of the presentation.)

Rachel's Daughters opens with a funeral procession — a hearse, followed by cars, drives up a winding road in beautiful hills. Over this a woman's voice says,

We are the generation who was born and came of adult age during the most toxic and environmentally unregulated decade ever known; whose baby food was contaminated with traces of DDT, PCBs, and DES. Our neighborhoods were sprayed with pesticides and filled with toxic wastes. Most of these chemicals did not even exist before World War II.... We didn't know that the 'in' generation was destined to become the cancer generation. We didn't know that so many of our mothers would bury us.

Experts consulted in *Rachel's Daughters* include Marion Moses, M.D., of the Pesticide Education Center; biologist/author Sandra Steingraber; Devra Lee Davis of the World Resources Institute; Donald Malins of the Pacific Northwest Research Foundation; Dr. Claude Hughes, Jr., of Duke University Medical Center; Dr. Ana Soto, of Tufts University School of Medicine; Dr. Graham Colditz of Har-

vard Medical School (involved in the "nurses' study"); Dr. Susan Love; and a number of National Cancer Institute spokespeople.

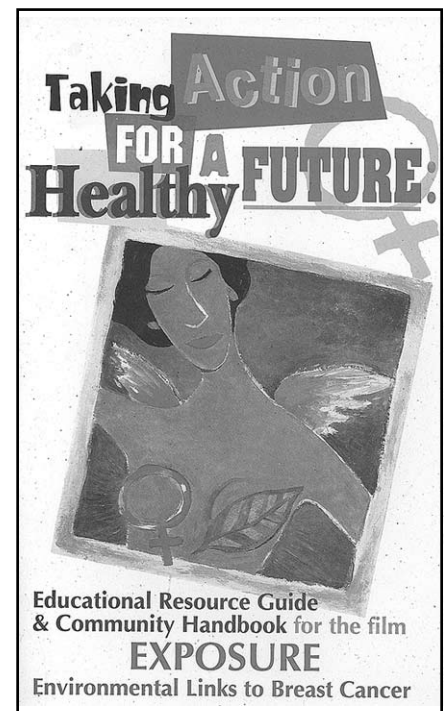
Some of the issues explored in the film:

- Heavy introduction in the U.S., after World War II, of breakdown products of DDT that are "xenoestrogens," or chemicals with estrogenic action
- How breast DNA gets changed by radiation, chemicals, etc.; the cumulative effects over time of trace amounts of carcinogens from many different sources ("nobody's looking at that right now")
- High mortality rates among African American women who get breast cancer
- The effects of long-term use of hormone replacement therapy
- How radiation interacts with estrogen
- The vast number (70,000) of chemicals in use in commercial quantities today, only 1,000 of which have been studied in detail for health effects

Rachel's Daughters ends with the group of women sitting in a circle of chairs out in a field, talking. Some of them are having recurrences of their cancer, and one of their original number has died. In the background stand silent women in black dresses and veils, representing the tens of thousands of women each year who die of breast cancer.

Of the three videos in this category, I have to admit to some preference for *Exposure*, the one distributed by the charitable organization WHEN (Women's Healthy Environments Network) of Toronto. Although it's among the worst sufferers of the lip-synch "time-lapse" problem, and (like *Rachel's Daughters*) it's not brand-new (it was originally produced for Canadian TV

in 1997, and has rather dated opening footage of women rollerblading), it still has a lot in its favor. It is certainly still timely — the experts featured in it are younger than they are in *Toxic Bust*, for instance, but they are saying pretty much the same things. *Exposure* won the 2001 "best health documentary" award in the New York International Independent Film Festival; as of this year it is available in DVD as well as VHS and in seven languages with more on the way; and it has the lowest purchase prices. What really stands out, though, is the printed 60-page resource booklet that comes with the video: *Taking Action for a Healthy Future*, chock-full of background information, bibliographies, discussion questions,



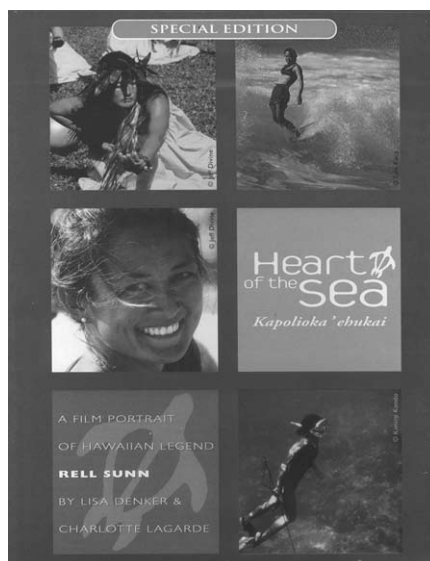
and suggestions for activism. I think the availability of the printed guide — along with the very reasonable cost for the video — makes *Exposure* a good choice for class, community-group, or individual use, especially if further research by viewers is desired or anticipated.

Olivia Newton-John, the pop star who is also a breast cancer survivor and activist, is the primary spokesperson on the screen in *Exposure*. The featured talking heads include some that appear in the other documentaries, notably Dr. Susan Love, as well as Dr. Devra Lee Davis (of the World Resources Institute), who is also a consulting producer for this film. We hear too from Dr. Rosalie Bertell, Ph.D., Epidemiologist, International Institute of Concern for Public Health, Toronto; and Drs. Ana Soto and Carlos Sonnenschein, cancer researchers at Tufts University in Boston. There is also poignant footage of the late Bella Abzug, former Congresswoman and president of the Women's Environment and Development Organization, saying optimistically of her own breast cancer, "Obviously I think I'm going to make it beyond the five years!" (She died in 1998, although her death was attributed to heart disease.)

This film, at least in its DVD version, has a table of contents that would also be useful for navigating directly to topics of interest. The "chapters" include "Radiation," "Organochlorines," "Estrogen," "Burden of Proof," "Resistance," "Mammography," and "Therapy and Chemoprevention Drugs."

Whichever of the three environmental documentaries is chosen, the video itself would serve primarily as a starting point for further study and as a call for action. The scientific and medical claims of each, as well as opposing viewpoints and critiques, could certainly be — and should be — investigated and updated. As mentioned already, that further study might be most easily facilitated with the 60-page resource guide that comes with *Exposure*.

A course segment on breast cancer could close with a showing of *Heart of the Sea*, the inspirational story



of Hawai'ian Rell Sunn, one of the first women surfers to become popular in the international sports scene, who battled breast cancer and eventual metastases for many years while continuing to practice and promote the sport. Sunn, who is interviewed extensively throughout the film, finally dies of cancer before filming is complete, and moving footage of her beach-side memorial — at the end of which dozens of young surfers take to the waves after Sunn's ashes are scattered at sea, against a background of Hawai'ian music — ends the piece. Although little time is given to causes of breast cancer in this production, there is a scene in which Rell, in a group discussion with other local women, recalls chasing after the mosquito-spraying truck that frequented her neighborhood when she was a kid: she was the fastest of the bunch and would actually catch up to the truck and come home "with slicked-back hair" plastered with DDT. Yikes. The film also provides some fascinating information about possible cancer treatments, because Sunn tried them all — including "Gamma knife" brain radiation at UCSF. Viewed after the other films reviewed here, *Heart of the Sea* — the story of a beloved cultur-

al hero who succumbed to the disease — can leave viewers with enhanced motivation to do something about the still-unresolved mysteries of rising breast cancer rates among women who have no genetic or lifestyle risk factors.

[JoAnne Lehman is co-editor of Feminist Collections.]

Sidelight: A Few More Resources on Breast Cancer

Sandra Steingraber, "The Breast Exposed," *Ms.*, Fall 2005, pp.55–56 (available online through ProQuest), and the seven websites listed following that article. Also, Sandra Steingraber's 1997 book *Living Downstream: A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment* (Vintage reprint edition, 1998).

The websites listed in *Ms.* are:

- Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow: www.healthytomorrow.org
- Breast Cancer Action: www.bcaction.org
- Breast Cancer and the Environment Research Centers: www.bcerc.org
- Breast Cancer Fund: www.breastcancerfund.org
- Collaborative on Health and the Environment: www.protectingourhealth.org
- Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition of Long Island: www.hbccac.org
- Program on Breast Cancer and Environmental Risk Factors (Cornell University): <http://envirocancer.cornell.edu>

Susan Love, M.D., "Fighting Breast Cancer Where It Begins," *Ms.*, Fall 2005, pp.57–58 (available online through ProQuest). Also, Susan Love's website, www.drSusanLoveResearchFoundation.org, and the newest (fourth) edition of *Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book* (Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2005).

Nancy Evans, ed., *State of the Evidence: What Is the Connection Between the Environment and Breast Cancer?* 4th edition (white paper from the Breast Cancer Fund and Breast Cancer Action, 2006), 86p., downloadable for free as a PDF from Breast Cancer Action at <http://www.bcaction.org/PDF/StateofEvidence.pdf>