

Naomi Weisstein

October 16, 1939–March 26, 2015



By Christopher Z. Hobson

Naomi Weisstein—scientist, feminist, irreverent and undeferential intelligence, and, with her husband Jesse Lemisch, a longtime friend of *The Utopian*—died March 26, 2015, after an agonizing struggle with cancer and a decades-long struggle against disabling illness that never destroyed her spunk and humor. In this brief note we can only mention briefly a few of her achievements. (See the links below for more extensive information.)

As an experimental psychologist, Weisstein's work focused on the agency of the brain in forming perceptions. In six major articles published in the leading journal *Science* from 1970 to 1982, and others elsewhere, Naomi made the case for contextual recognition in visual perception—that recognizing a shape depends not just on the shape itself but also judging its relation to the forms around it, and that brain structures previously thought to respond only to simple inputs could perform these more complex recognitions. This was a paradigm shift in the understanding of mental cognitive ability.

As feminist theorist, Naomi took apart the anti-woman assumptions of dominant psychological theories in “Kinder, Küche, Kirche as Scientific Law: Psychology Constructs the Female” (1968). The title, from the conservative slogan that translates as “Children, Kitchen, Church,” glorifying the domestic, subservient female, communicates Weisstein's view of both Freudian and behaviorist psychology. The article was expanded and reprinted a quarter-century later (as “Psychology Constructs the Female,” *Feminism and Psychology*, June 1993) and remains a classic statement of feminist psychological theory.

As feminist activist, Naomi was a founding member of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (1969–1977), a very important group in early radical feminism.

And as musician and general hell-raiser, Naomi spearheaded the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band (1970–1973, a chapter of CWLU), one of the first women's rock ensembles and an answering voice to the blatant sexism of much male rock in such raucous and jaunty songs as “Papa Don't Lay That Shit on Me” (also the title of the group's debut album), with lyrics like “Papa don't lay that shit on me, you just don't turn me on.”

There is much more, mainly packed into too brief a time. From 1980 onward, Naomi was permanently sidelined and severely disabled by Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, which stole her health, vitality, and ability to do much writing, but never her fighting spirit, her warmth, or her humor. We salute this guiding spirit.

For more information, see:

Video of Naomi Weisstein Memorial Celebration, New School University (New York), Sept. 20, 2015:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ci9OgqTHpXo&feature=youtu.be>

“Tears and Laughter for Naomi Weisstein,” by Jeremy Varon. <http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/09/tears-and-laughter-for-naomi-weisstein/#.Vgv4cOxVikr>.

On CWLU: “Our Band of Sisters” by Christine Riddiough.
<https://chicagowomensliberationunion.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/ourband.pdf>