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# Naomi Weisstein

October 16, 1939–March 26, 2015

Chris Hobson

December 9, 2015

Naomi Weisstein—scientist, feminist, irreverent and undef-  
erential 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 ma-  
jor articles published in the leading journal *Science* from 1970  
to 1982, and others elsewhere, Naomi made the case for contex-  
tual recognition in visual perception—that recognizing a shape  
depends not just on the shape itself but also judging its rela-  
tion 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,

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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: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

“Tears and Laughter for Naomi Weisstein,” by Jeremy Varon. [www.publicseminar.org](http://www.publicseminar.org)

On CWLU: “Our Band of Sisters” by Christine Riddiough. [chicagowomensliberationunion.files.wordpress.com](http://chicagowomensliberationunion.files.wordpress.com)