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**Introducing the Red Tent: A discursive and critically hopeful exploration of women's circles in a neoliberal postfeminist context. Forthcoming in *Sociological Research Online***

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**Abstract**

Red Tents (RTs) are women's circles that have increased in popularity in recent years, but they are an under-researched movement. This paper explores the way in which RTs are presented online by those involved. Setting these groups in a postfeminist context, and building on the work of Longman (2018), I explore the place of RTs in relation to neoliberal discourses of individualism and autonomy. Via an analysis of the RTs online presence, I argue that the RT presents as a place of acceptance (of self and others) where negative emotions can be aired and bonds between women are formed. Whilst acknowledging several caveats to accepting this presentation at face value – not least the potential perpetuation of hegemonic power relations, systemic inequalities and privilege, particularly regarding biological essentialism and whiteness – I also assert that the full picture is more nuanced. Drawing on a feminist position of possibility (e.g. Haraway, 2019), ultimately I argue that RTs appear to offer a refuge of resistance from neoliberalism.

**Keywords**

*The Red Tent Movement, Women's Circles, Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, Holistic milieu, spirituality, critical hope*

This article explores the Red Tent (RT) movement and how it is presented online. RT's are a form of women's circle which appear to be a growing phenomenon. In September 2019 there were 167 registered UK (125 in January, 2018) and 205 European RTs (RT Directory, 2019). RTs and women's circles have received scant academic attention with exceptions in the US (Leidenfrost, 2012a, 2012b) and Europe (Longman, 2018). It is difficult therefore, to determine how RTs are presented and what role they play in women's lives and the wider social environment. I begin by detailing the RTs emergence and purpose, followed by contextualization in the forces of neoliberalism and the 'holistic milieu'. Drawing on Gill's (2007, 2017) concept of postfeminism and building on concerns around the neoliberal spiritual self in Longman's (2018) research, I posit that RTs present as opportunities for self-care in community

with other women and that relations between women are being positively transformed. I acknowledge that there are potential 'red flags' concerning privilege and exclusion which merit further interrogation, but argue that RTs may be illustrating a (complex, even contradictory) degree of resistance. I conclude by aligning with a critically hopeful stance in feminist work and identify possible trajectories for future research into women's circles.

### **What is the Red Tent?**

Women's circles are non-hierarchical gatherings of women who often meet monthly around the new or full moon. Group size varies; some are facilitated by organizations e.g. Gather the Women, Woman Within, Millionth Circle or The Wild Woman Project; others have arisen independently. Whilst some are closed or limited, many are promoted as open to any women wishing to attend (RT Directory, 2019). RTs are sometimes affiliated with an umbrella organization known as The Red Tent Movement or the Red Tent Temple Movement (RTTM). However, they are encouraged to evolve and organize organically, depending on local facilitators and attendees (Leidenfrost and Starkweather, 2015). Starkweather (2011 – RTTM founder) claims RTs centre on women's' experiences and honour and celebrate womanhood. This might be achieved by sharing, listening, supporting, and reclaiming menstruation and women's bodies as contested locations of shame, taboo or inferiority<sup>i</sup>. Leidenfrost (2012b: 2) argues that RTs offer opportunities for,

“Building community, encouraging caring, healing and empowerment, offering a platform for sharing stories, and serving as a tool for menstruation-positive activism, while simultaneously providing a space for self-care and renewal.”

Some are literal red tents (see figure 1); others may be rooms adorned with crimson fabrics and silks which allude to menstruation, wombs and the emblematic meaning these possess (figure 2). These transform the physical area into a potentially sacred space (Leidenfrost, 2012b). At times, RTs might be more 'metaphoric'; a special time set aside from ordinary life.

Figure 1: The Woodsisters Red Tent/The Red Alachigh. Photo courtesy of Sue Charman.



For some the divine feminine is important. This, along with engagement in practices such as journaling, divination, tarot, healing touch, crystal work, meditation and spiritual ‘arts and crafts’ (Leidenfrost, 2012b; Longman, 2018) indicate a connection with what has been termed the ‘holistic milieu’ (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). This context includes holistic spiritualities and ‘New Age<sup>ii</sup>’ phenomena, but also more overtly secular practices concerning the wellbeing of the body, mind and spirit, such as yoga, mindfulness and meditation, self-help and complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). The line between spiritual and secular practices is often blurred. There are differing levels of commitment to ‘spirituality’ in women’s circles (Longman, 2018), though some practices are used to make sense of life and relationships or self-discovery and personal growth (Reed and Neville, 2014). This illuminates how wellbeing practices are embedded in neoliberalism, whereby an individualised subject seeks to reveal their autonomous, authentic self (Houtman and Aupers, 2007). Critics have argued that consumption defines many of these practices, that access is limited by affluence and that it forms an industry which ultimately strengthens contemporary capitalism (Carrette and King, 2005).

**Figure 2: Red Tent at the Wisconsin film premiere of “Things We Don’t Talk About” at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Design Gallery.** Photo courtesy of Don Mendenhall. Copyright Soulful Media, 2012.



A key influence upon the movement is Anita Diamant's (1997) novel *The Red Tent* set in an ancient (biblical) context. The RT is where the women ‘...gather once a month during menstruation, where they exchange stories and histories and pass on the secrets of love-making, herbal medicine and, most importantly, midwifery’ (Clark, 2002: online). Diamant deploys the RT as an empowering space for women in her radical feminist retelling of an Old Testament narrative – ‘the rape of Dinah’. Other influences on the emergence of RTs include the American Women’s spirituality movement, the Goddess

Feminist movement, imagined pre-historic matriarchal societies and cross-cultural examples of menstrual spaces, such as moon lodges within some Native American traditions<sup>iii</sup> (Leidenfrost, 2012b; Longman, 2018).

Whilst demographics concerning attendance are not known, it is *likely* that the RT is predominantly white given the overwhelming whiteness in active leisure, learning and well-being workforces in the UK (Sector Skills Assessment, 2010) combined with the finding that those embedded in CAM and the holistic milieu are mostly white (Keshet and Simchai, 2014). RTs may also be lacking in diversity regarding sexuality, trans and queer identities. Longman's (2018) research into women's circles in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, suggested that women from 'diverse backgrounds' attended. However, this seems to reference women's orientation to feminism(s), educational levels, socioeconomic class and differing professions, as the majority identified as white, cisgender<sup>iv</sup> and heterosexual. Additionally, Leidenfrost (2012b: 115) reports that 'Caucasian, Native American, African American, and Latina' attendees were at US RTs, though proportions of each are not offered. The picture in the UK is unclear though there are 'inclusive statements' about welcoming diverse experiences of womanhood and, in some cases, explicit mention of trans women and intersectionality (e.g. Bilowus, 2016).

There are potential implications if the RT movement is predominantly white, cisgendered and heterosexual, where hegemonic norms and institutionalized forms of power are entrenched and reproduced. These systematically exclude and 'Other' British Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and LGBTQ+ identities (Hobbs, 2018). Ultimately, a lack of diversity may perniciously sustain social dynamics structured by systematic inequities, discrimination and abuse. Williams (2014) identifies the neoliberal spiritual subject who unwittingly maintains the hegemonic status quo in a quest for personal growth and self-improvement. Are RTs, unwittingly or otherwise, reinforcing these intersectional inequities?

Helpful to framing this is the concept of a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007), which highlights individualism, choice and agency, a focus on women's bodies, regimes of beauty and an insatiable demand for continuous 'self-improvement'. Best understood as a 'distinctive kind of gendered neoliberalism' (Gill, 2017: 611), this sensibility creates a consuming distraction from material and structural inequities, repackaging any residual problems women experience as their individual responsibility. It has also heralded the emergence of 'neoliberal feminism' (Rottenberg, 2014) which exists alongside other contesting forms of feminism, but perpetuates neoliberal compliance. Gill (2017:

619) argues that postfeminism has been transformed into a psychic sensibility – the ‘turn to character’ (Bull and Allen, 2018) – as well as a social and cultural one. Women’s emotional and psychological states are thus subject to microscopic levels of self-scrutiny, self-governmentality and surveillance. The individual focus is directed inwards to assess where ‘faults’ are – with character, psychology, ability to cope, etc. – which then require ‘work’ (Gill, 2017).

It is not difficult to see how the holistic milieu might be implicated here. Values such as self-fulfillment, self-responsibility, autonomy and authenticity (Sointu, 2011) are prized. There is a view of holistic spiritualities as a manifestation of narcissistic ‘self’ worship (Houtman and Aupers, 2007), the self-improvement of the neoliberal subject in perpetuity (Gill, 2017), or the shaping of an ideal neoliberal citizen (Raisborough, 2011). This exaggerates the individualized and fragmented nature of such pursuits (Castro, 2015; Houtman and Aupers, 2007), and negates that women might have struggled to ‘have a self all along’ (Crowley, 2011: 3). However, there is an important question concerning whether women’s circles perpetuate these neoliberal structures. For instance, practicing yoga is reported to be beneficial. This is often claimed without considering how yoga ‘buys into’ neoliberal ideals about self-improvement (transcendence or bodily perfection) and individual wellbeing (Godrej, 2017), whilst simultaneously privileging whiteness and the ideal neoliberal body: a lean one (Berila, Klein and Roberts, 2016).

The problem, Gill (2017: 620) argues, is that celebrations of ‘women’s individual capacity to resist patriarchal scripts’ within the holistic milieu overlook neoliberal acquiescence, signifying ‘reliance upon a depoliticised mindset that might be thought of as a kind of ‘spiritual materialism’’. This is pertinent for RTs because they may be facilitating political apathy – a common criticism aimed at holistic spiritualities (Finley, 1991). Gill’s concerns are that the postfeminist sensibility does not disrupt neoliberal or patriarchal structures, nor expose structural inequalities or social disadvantage, while celebrating women as individually powerful agents. In light of this, Longman (2018: 4) asks,

“Do spaces such as women’s circles offer alternative experiences of self, body, and spirituality that challenge dominant representations of... [their]—commodified and sexualized—bod[ies]? Or, conversely, are these ‘new’ femininities perhaps more expressive of a postfeminist neo-liberal governmentality of consumer culture in which individuals are falsely construed as self-interested economic actors with agency and control over their lives?”

Essentially, Longman asks if women’s circles offer any challenge to a neoliberal, postfeminist, status quo. The answer is unlikely to be as polarized as the question suggests but we can explore the presentation of RTs’ through this lens. This is because neoliberalism has been considered such a pervasive force on the individual agency of subjects alongside the deployment and enactment of activism within society. This paper thus addresses three intersecting questions:

1. Are RTs an extension of the gendered neoliberal project of ‘self-improvement’?
2. Can we dismiss the RT as the latest incarnation of the individualized neoliberal expression of the wellbeing industry?
3. Or are there any reasons to be hopeful about this movement pushing against the forces of neoliberalism and offering a sliver of qualified sanguinity?

## Method

This paper forms part of the first phase of a bigger project that explores the RT movement. Phase 1 explores how RTs are presented online (including social media, websites, blogs) and on film. Internet searches were carried out between December 2017 and September 2019 for online media concerning ‘The Red Tent’ and ‘The Red Tent Movement’ (see figure 3 for a breakdown by type and number). Searches were performed intermittently during this period.

**Figure 3: Breakdown of online RT media**

Media Type	Number
Websites	21
Newsletters	12
Blogs	8
Online Newspaper & Magazine Articles	7
Social Media sites	2
Apps	1
Films	1

There is a limited amount of online material about RTs. Websites provide detail about the emergence of the movement and signposting for locating circles. Consequently, websites were catalogued if they displayed some engagement with RTs, content was more substantial than two paragraphs and noticeably distinct from other entries. Two websites are core: [The RT Temple Movement](#) (US) and the [RT](#)



Directory (UK). The remaining sites include individual open-access RT websites in differing localities (though UK RTs are more likely to have a closed Facebook page), blog posts, media articles and personal reflections. There was also one instance of film media (advertised online but only available through purchase), one app and monthly e-newsletters from The RT Directory.

I analysed various excerpts from several locations and became interested in the overwhelmingly positive slant. This is what unites the four accounts<sup>v</sup> selected here<sup>vi</sup>. I applied a discursive analysis influenced by Conversation Analysis (CA) and Discursive Psychology<sup>vii</sup> (DP) (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Wooffitt, 2005) as there are several principles that afford a rigorous and constructivist interrogation of these texts. These include a fine-grained level of detail, rigour, the accountability of claims, language as ‘social action’ and constructivism. I began the analysis with meticulous attention to each word, line, and phrasing of one account. Connotations of the writing were interrogated for what was being communicated, what was being assumed or hidden, common rhetorical devices, and concepts from broader culture (Castro, 2009). These were considered for what functions they performed. The same process was repeated with other accounts to develop common ideas.

This fine-grained attuning process operates on the principle that any analytic claims must be firmly positioned in the data and are therefore visible and accountable to readers (Wooffitt, 2005). It also ensures a focus on the language used and aims to tighten analyses so that data are not forced into ill-fitting themes. The other important aspect of an approach informed by CA and DP is a commitment to a constructivist epistemology which views language as a medium that achieves social actions (Wooffitt, 2005) – we do things with our words – and not as a direct or unproblematic representation of our thoughts, feelings, or motivations (Edwards and Potter, 1992). Whilst these are primarily considered in interactive data by CA and DP, it is possible for discursive analyses to consider these principles in relation to ‘investigating language in use and language in social contexts’ (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001: i), which includes written texts. This research was also conducted with a strong feminist thread, preserving the reported importance of women’s experiences and identifying aspects which may benefit women (Thompson, Rickett and Day, 2018).

This methodological approach facilitated an exploration of how the language, rhetoric and mobilization of identities is enacted in online texts concerning the holistic milieu and contemporary UK society. It also aided the interrogation of reported experiences, actions or conduct for individualised neoliberal sentiment.

## Narratives of the Red Tent

Below are four extracts which were selected to represent voices embedded in the RT movement (extracts 1 and 2) and voices from attendees (3 and 4). They were chosen from a larger corpus of data because of the breadth of issues which connect them to relevant literature in feminism and the sociology of religion. The first two come from the film *'Things we don't talk about'* which is a depiction of RTs, its purpose and effects (Leidenfrost, 2012a). The second two are taken from individual blog posts reflecting on personal experiences of RTs.

In the first extract Leidenfrost explains why she made the film about RTs.

### Extract 1 – Leidenfrost (2012b)

1        *I made this film because I'd been a participant in red tents for many years and I have seen*  
2        *how it's transforming women's lives. I am making the film because I believe in the power of*  
3        *the red tent movement and I believe in its ability to really influence a lot of women. (p150) ...*  
4        *The Red Tent is a do--over switch, it's the reset button.... when you leave the Red Tent, you're*  
5        *---- for a moment or a month or for the rest of your life, you're the woman that you want to*  
6        *be. (p153)*

She positions herself as qualified to represent RTs via her direct participation: 'I have *seen* how it's transforming women's lives' (my emphasis, lines 1-2). Staking a claim as a first-person witness adds credibility (Potter, 1996). Women's lives are presented as likely to change through RT attendance (lines 2-3). This transformation is exclusively positive and somehow fulfils a projection of a woman's subjectively desired self (line 5). This echoes the ongoing revelation of a latent 'authentic' self found in holistic spiritualities (Houtman and Aupers, 2007). Leidenfrost mentions a 'reset button' as if life were a kind of contaminant which the RT clears. It has been convincingly argued that the contemporary Western context is characterised by a self-scrutinising and affective turn (Bull and Allen, 2018); one that elevates a consideration of the worthiness of the self as a physical and psychological project to be worked on and improved. This focus, Gill (2017) argues, locates any or issues 'inside' individual women, instead of with structures or institutions, and simultaneously aims to mollify those individuals.

The next extract provides more detail about the positive experience of RTs from Alisa Starkweather, founder of the RT Temple Movement, who is interviewed by Leidenfrost for her film.

**Extract 2 – Alisa Starkweather** (Leidenfrost, 2012b: 157)

1 *I've always been a great advocate that vulnerability and transparency is our strength. It's not*  
2 *hiding. It's not covering up. ...It's a messy place to be who we really are and to let it be...and*  
3 *it's difficult to expose oneself. But it's worth it because it's our humanity. And every single*  
4 *part of our humanity, every part, not the parts that we think are going to be the parts that*  
5 *other people are gonna admire or respect or love, but every part of our being because every*  
6 *being has all of it, the anger, the suffering, the grief, the fear, the terror. ...And we ---- we are*  
7 *rising in that ---- in that experience of no longer being ashamed, no longer marginalizing, no –*  
8 *--- no longer allowing ourselves to take ourselves down from the inside. And we're asking*  
9 *each other not to take each other down by the relationships that we're forming.*

Starkweather orients positively to RTs as places where women are revealing or 'exposing' themselves (line 3). Authenticity is foregrounded – 'being who we really are' (line 2) – recognising that this might be challenging. Vulnerability and honesty (line 1) are cited as strengths. This reflects therapy culture (Furedi, 2003), whereby expressing feelings is how we do 'being psychologically well' or address issues. This is about full disclosure – 'not hiding... not covering up' (lines 1-2). She advocates including 'negative' aspects, 'the anger, the suffering, the grief, the fear, the terror' (line 6). This is in opposition to advice from the self-help movement (which tends to promote positivity – see Gill and Orgad, 2018), and directly confronts what is disavowed by postfeminism: the expression of so-called *negative* emotions (Kanai, 2015, 2017; Gill, 2017). Do RTs sanction sharing 'problematic' emotions? Are RTs spaces for women's 'unpalatable' selves and experiences?

Starkweather suggests that RTs foster a collective, 'we are rising' (line 6-7); advocating a powerful shift from expelling negative emotions to fostering positive bonds. This rousing call to others extends to her depiction of women casting off shame and 'no longer marginalising' (line 7). Significantly, she constructs an agentic role for women in the marginalisation of others and/or themselves. Starkweather is likely (in part) referring to cultural narratives where competition, 'bitchiness' or meanness characterise relations between women. She also mentions women's self-sabotage ('no longer allowing ourselves to take ourselves down from the inside' – line 8) reference to an internalised voice of self-doubt in women.

The 'inner critic' concept is housed in some psychotherapeutic discourse (Stinckens, Lietaer and Leijssen, 2002), popular psychology and the self-help genre (e.g. Gilbert, 2015; Krysa, 2016). Whilst it is perceived as a phenomenon that can affect anyone, it is more readily associated with girls and women (e.g. Richardson, 2016). Understood as a destructive force it contributes to low confidence or self-esteem and is potentially debilitating. Starkweather positions RTs as spaces for combating, airing or accepting self-critical voices and a force for positive change in women's lives.

Starkweather identifies issues blighting women's lives and addresses these in internalised individual terms that could perpetuate the psy-complex (Rose, 1985) and a psychologised form of postfeminism (Gill, 2017). However, this is not straightforward. Firstly, she promotes *sharing* 'negative' feelings – those which might be increasingly publicly 'prohibited' or restricted for women in many online spaces (e.g. Kanai, 2015, 2017). And secondly, she talks of a collectivity or solidarity between women, building bonds through the RT.

Several of the ideas explored in Starkweather's interview are explicitly illuminated in a blog post by Vanessa Olorenshaw.

### **Extract 3 – Olorenshaw (2015)**

1 I recently midwived a Red Tent into being in my local area (see [here](#) for listings of Tents in  
2 your area), having loved attending a group near my family and the town of my upbringing. I  
3 have commented to the Women of the Red Tent Movement that I see it as a precious, safe,  
4 space for women - something I hadn't realised was missing until I had attended my first  
5 gathering...

6 So this is about women meeting their own needs. This is about women respecting and  
7 understanding their cycles and their bodies. This is about women fuelling their wellbeing by  
8 the accepting and supportive company of women. If the feelings a woman can have on  
9 stepping out of the Tent could be bottled, it would be sold for a mint and scientists would  
10 queue to dissect its composition. Each dose, each gathering, a tonic...

11 Much in the same way as Adrienne Rich, feeling like a rebel, a renegade from the institution  
12 of motherhood; so have I felt rebellious and earthly, a rebel from the institution of economic

13 and capitalistic misogyny, in a way which I had never experienced before spending three  
14 hours a month in the company of women in the Red Tent. In a nurturing space. A nourishing  
15 space. It immediately brought to a head many emotions I had not confronted for years: why  
16 had I avoided groups of women where possible, for so long? Why had I always felt  
17 uncomfortable among groups of women? How had I come to see a group of women as  
18 unavoidably toxic and venomous, rather than life-affirming and mutually supportive?

Olorenshaw emphasises RTs as vital; treasured by her and others as 'precious, safe, space for women...' (lines 3-4). Further, she depicts the movement addressing some previously unknown inner need – 'something I hadn't realised was missing' (line 4).

Olorenshaw's claim that 'women are meeting their own needs' (line 6) implies they are not being met elsewhere. Women who look after others (e.g. nurturing and caring for children, partners and/or parents) are likely depleted from giving. 'Emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) is often invisible, under-appreciated and distinctly gendered. Whilst it is recognized that carers need to ensure *their* good health to offer optimum care (prioritising self-protection and respite so that emotionally-intensive work is not detrimental to an individual) self-care is often still hidden (Knowles *et al.*, 2016). The concept of self-care has roots in the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Audre Lorde (1988: 131) argued that 'caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.' The original message from Lorde is concerned with 'self-preservation' – meaning looking after oneself, in spite of the circumstances, as a revolutionary act. Lorde was a black lesbian feminist living with cancer. She conveys the damaging effects of homophobia and racism as analogous to the damage caused by cancer. The self-care hinted at here is a form of resistance, looking after oneself, one's own needs, in the face of being ground down by the wider facts (those more difficult to affect) of one's existence. Is the RT aiming to resurrect this kind of 'self-care'?

RTs are presented as empowering and liberating spaces, encouraging women to seriously consider their own needs – 'fuelling their wellbeing' (line 7). Olorenshaw suggests that women's company is 'accepting and supportive' (line 8) indicating a special context is required to cultivate this. The potential effects of participation are hinted at here – 'the feelings a woman can have on stepping out of the Tent' (lines 8-9) – and viewed as a remedy for the ills brought about by contemporary living. The gatherings provide a remedial injection, an instantaneous 'hit' ('a dose... a tonic' – line 10), which offers relief from the 'toils' of an atomised existence.

Olorenshaw critiques the ‘institution of economic and capitalist misogyny’ (lines 12-13) and positions herself as a ‘rebel’ (line 11). She flags her rejection of dominant narratives of motherhood (Olorenshaw, 2016) and aligns herself with feminist Adrienne Rich (1986) who wrote about the body and motherhood as an institution. Olorenshaw constructs her rebellion as being in community with other women. She refers to shifts in her relations with and perceptions of women because of the supportive RT atmosphere (lines 15-18). This self-reflection is couched in cultural narratives about competition and bitchiness between women.

This altered perspective on relations between women and a self-review instigated by the RT appear also in final extract.

**Extract 4 – Wise Women Rise (2017: online)**

1 I had no idea and could not imagine that the way I interacted with other women and  
2 thought about myself could be so different and so healed as they are now. I came into this  
3 movement with an endless stream of negative self-talk. The thought of talking about even  
4 the most mundane things would cause a panic attack, and I often found myself in  
5 conversations with long awkward pauses on my end, while I considered all the possible  
6 responses and consequences of everything I might say in that moment.

This extract adds a reported transformation to the preceding analysis. The author speaks of living with a debilitating inner critic: ‘an endless stream of negative self-talk’ (line 3). She appeals to empathy and humanity via a confessional narrative about her lack of confidence and social anxiety. The thought of talking ‘would cause a panic attack’ (line 4), and conversations were peppered ‘with long awkward pauses on my end’ (line 5). This is in stark contrast to the reported consequences of attending the RT. Her interactions with women are improved and her own self-judgement is transformed – ‘so different and so healed’ (line 2). This illustrates how the private is increasingly bared in public. Furedi lamented this shift, arguing that it restricts acceptable emotional expressions and is a self-feeding cycle.

“...by upholding the act of seeking help, society continually demands the exposure of pain and public contrition. By treating emotions and feelings as the defining feature of individual identity, the private sphere has become a legitimate area for public scrutiny.”

(Furedi, 2003: online)

Foucault pinpointed how confession was implicated in the workings of power. Arguing that ‘the obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points...that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us’ (Foucault, 1978: 60), he linked this to the processes of individualisation, power and the panopticon (self-surveillance and self-governmentality).

Neoliberal structures position the individual as responsible for dealing with their psychic life, character flaws, and social anxiety. This is achieved via therapy or self-help, both of which remain predominantly concerned with a discrete unit of ‘self’ (Raisborough, 2011). However, RTs are presented as powerful places that help individuals change themselves and their relations with other women.

### **Discussion**

There are many possible threads to discuss here but I focus on those which connect directly to the three questions posed earlier. I argue that RTs are presented as a space for acceptance (of self and others). RTs interweave dominant tropes from the holistic milieu concerning authenticity and have individualistic elements indicative of ‘self-help’ or therapy culture, while simultaneously providing a non-judgmental, communal context where negative emotions can be aired and debilitating ‘inner critics’ can be contested. Further, I argue that RTs appear to be a refuge from everyday life for (some) women in neoliberal capitalist patriarchal contexts, building bonds, shifting relations between and conceptions of other women. Whilst noting that there are some caveats (which require much more comprehensive consideration elsewhere) concerning potential exclusion and privilege, particularly regarding biological essentialism and whiteness, the question of whether RTs merely reproduce existing power structures cannot be answered in the confines of this paper.

### **Self-improvement and the RT: Troubling the neoliberal subject?**

RTs are presented as nurturing and nourishing spaces that ‘feed’ women, giving them something that they did not know they were lacking (Olorenshaw, 2015). Women can discuss difficult experiences knowing that the self they offer in these gatherings appears to be accepted. They are presented as a safe, supportive and containing spaces. Might these moments of connection, healing and support be favourable instances of self-care? What constitutes caring for oneself might differ for different women. Self-care has been conceptualized as ‘meaningful’ (Holmes, 2016: 104), genuine (Hicks Peterson, 2017) or ‘radical’ (Longman, 2018: 13). But what exemplifies *these* forms of self-care, can we distinguish them and are they in opposition to neoliberalism?

Some 'self-care' practices more clearly align with a Market model. When acts of self-care necessitate consumption, they prop up capitalism (Carrette and King, 2005). The 'wellness' sector also entrenches inequalities regarding access to activities or products – e.g. spa days, CAM services, premium skincare. This creates ambiguity and tension. Whilst individuals might attribute subjective empowerment to skincare regimes or 'clean' eating (#self-care), these actions conceal power differentials and perpetuate existing socio-political structures (Godrej, 2017).

The RT movement presents ideas from the holistic milieu, self-help and therapy culture e.g. the drive for authenticity, being 'true' to oneself, and expressing emotions, which might be considered individualistic. However, the destructive 'inner critic' seems to be an internalization of damaging ideas about women and their capabilities in a patriarchal (misogynistic) context. Further, emotional expression is gendered and the presentation of emotions in public spaces is often 'policed' e.g. anger is often considered difficult to display (Kanai, 2015). RTs then, present as an environment in which women can combat this damaging systemic internalization *in solidarity* with other women. Additionally, they provide opportunities for connection with other women, a space in which to be 'vulnerable' and share feelings and experiences that might be troublesome to air in other spaces. If women are experiencing the ability to share problematic experiences and emotions and these are sanctioned in RTs, this is important. The intimation is that RTs are special spaces for women whereby 'an absence – of misogyny, sexism – can throw into sharp relief its features and impacts, thereby intensifying the recognition of oppressive practices as pervasive, powerful and normalized' (Lewis et al, 2015: 5.6).

RTs present as a retreat from the realities of life in a patriarchal, neoliberal capitalist society. Offering an oasis from competing demands of work, caring responsibilities, domestic duties and personal gadgets alongside pressures concerning selfhood, identity and 'self-betterment' that are commonly gendered and intersectional. The 'failed promise' of liberation for women is sometimes attributed to the circumstances of contemporary living, particularly concerning the combination of caring and working and the persistent lesser status of the former (Olorenshaw, 2016). Longman (2018: 2) too argues that women's circles are a response to 'the perceived failure of neo-liberal gender ideology to empower women and transform society within secular modernity'. It is possible that RTs provide refuges from contemporary existence.



There are echoes of consciousness-raising (CR) groups that emerged in 1960s and 70s during second wave feminism. Whilst CR groups were supportive spaces for sharing lived experiences, they were also sites that forged resistance against gender oppression. Women's circles deploy similar techniques regarding solidarity between women, which is presented as potentially transformative, but is not overtly political (Longman, 2018). Self-care in community might cultivate the possibility for social change in some circumstances (this might not be the aim of RTs and will not *necessarily* lead to activism). Nonetheless, for activism to take place, care of oneself is paramount.

“Connection is a basic human need, one that gives us a sense of safety, belonging, purpose and meaning... Supporting and feeding connection, as well as incorporating regular practices that nurture oneself, family and community, is vital to resisting injustice and creating peace.”

(Hicks Peterson, 2017: 105)

There is some evidence – albeit limited so far – that RTs can direct energy towards social, political or community activism (e.g. Estancia Seranova, 2017).

### **‘Red Flags’**

This exploration also raises some potential ‘red flags’ regarding women's bodies and issues of power and privilege. Firstly, in terms of a biological view of woman and secondly in terms of whiteness. There are historical and contemporary threads of biological essentialism in different feminisms e.g. cultural and radical, which assert a view of womanhood that is tied ontologically to an ascription of binary sex at birth (Alcoff, 1988). This might lead to assumptions about the universality of physiological processes experienced by many women (e.g. menstruation). However, this is problematic for several reasons. Primarily, because the link between sex and gender is not so automatic, simplistic or straightforward (Butler, 1993). As Stephano (2019: 149) asserts, ‘cultural norms may in fact circumscribe what comes to count as a sexually specific body’ where ‘the boundaries delimiting the sexes... [can be viewed] as a discursive means by which these borders are established and maintained’. Through this lens the irreducibility of gender to sex is questionable. As Butler (1993) suggests, bodies become understandable and are produced via discourse in the social sphere. Moreover, experiences of womanhood are diverse and do not always include wombs, breasts or menstruation.

It is possible that RTs are open to more diverse identities. Longman (2018) suggests that women's circles reject 'complete biological or cultural essentialism' (p10) and embrace a new form of femininity that sanctions varied embodiment; seen as more 'experiential, ritual and symbolic' (p9) than biologically rooted. Furthermore, there are instances of explicit inclusivity on some RT webpages, 'In the Red Tent space feminism will never be used to justify transphobia and exclusion. Trans women are honoured in equal measure with all other women.' (Bilowus, 2016: online). However, this is an issue that merits much more sustained attention elsewhere.

The second issue concerns the *likely* overwhelming whiteness of the RT in the UK<sup>viii</sup>. A lack of diversity conceals the privilege enjoyed and maintained by white women, to the detriment of BAME identities and overlooks institutionalized racism, inequity and the daily harms experienced by BAME women. The issue of whiteness in holistic spiritualities has been flagged in the blogosphere (Rosenberg, 2016). Recently, there have been calls for white people to actively engage with anti-racism (Rice, 2017), and work to resolve the tension between 'spirituality' and racism (Tochluk, 2016). Understandably there is also frustration and disillusionment about the fruitless mission to educate white people about their part in racism (Saad, 2017). This issue requires a much deeper level of analysis than can be considered here. Further, some research (Mears and Ellison, 2000) found that US consumers of holistic spiritual materials were not exclusively white women, indicating the complexity of the situation. There *are* possible issues with exclusion that cannot be ruled out, but equally, these may not wholly detract from beneficial aspects of RTs.

### **Avenues for exploration**

Aside from issues of possible exclusion and privilege there is the need to consider whether the RT speaking to specific populations. Some women are arguably absent from dominant cultural representations associated with the postfeminist sensibility, 'older women, bigger women, women with wrinkles, etc. are never accorded sexual subjecthood and are still subject to offensive and sometimes vicious representations' (Gill, 2007: 152). Women in RTs could be those who are disillusioned or disregarded by aspects of the postfeminist sensibility. RTs appear to be forming spaces where women can 'bring emotions to the surface and acknowledge the trauma, vulnerability, grief and hopelessness' (Hicks Peterson, 2017: 105) that are inherent parts of their lives. Nurturing and '[c]ultivating supportive and safe community spaces in which to process such things creates opportunities for self-care and the development of resilience, hope and belonging' (p105). These aspects are potential bedrocks for wider

change and a possible avenue for exploration; considering the ways in which RTs are involved with their localities or broader society in this way.

## Conclusions

This exploratory paper has delved into representations of RTs as an under-researched movement. There are indications of a neoliberal postfeminist sensibility which is intertwined with the RTs presentation online and several intersectional issues worthy of more sustained attention. Whilst I stand by this critical theoretical positioning, I have also argued that this is not the whole picture. The suggestion that relationships between women are shifting, and that 'problematic' emotions and selves are being shared and accepted in solidarity with other women are aspects of significance to be acknowledged.

Therefore, I am arguing for RTs to be defined in terms of movement and possibility, as ongoing and shifting phenomena. Consequently, we can consider what is being facilitated which appears beneficial and what is being unwittingly perpetuated. This encompasses hope, in the spirit of Wood and Litherland's (2017: 1) concept of 'critical feminist hope' which they deploy to attempt to shift the conversation beyond an inevitable 'co-option' of phenomena by neoliberalism. Hope in this sense becomes a conduit for constructive evolution or movement (which is not linear or uni-directional). Critical analyses *can* be deconstructive, pessimistic and lacking in hope. In adopting a critical lens, there is a tendency to be reproachful of actions reproducing structures, without any recourse to opportunity. In a recent interview, Donna Haraway emphasizes the need for possibility, proposing that change requires openness, '...we can't do that in a negative mood... if we do nothing but critique. We need critique, we absolutely need it. But it's not going to open up the sense of what might yet be' (Weigel, 2019: online). My position recognises the complexity, the contradictions and tensions surrounding RTs, but equally acknowledges signs of possibility. This paper makes a small contribution to researching women's circles (adding to Leidenfrost, 2012b; Longman, 2018) and locates RTs as *potential* refuges of resistance to neoliberalism.

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<sup>i</sup> The RT has been accused of (re)essentialising womanhood. Longman (2018) argues that 'femininity' in women's circles is more creative and symbolic. I raise this issue here but it warrants further discussion.

<sup>ii</sup> This is a pejorative label which is not used by those embedded in such practices (Castro, 2019; Partridge, 2004).

<sup>iii</sup> There are potential issues with cultural appropriation, but there isn't space to explore them here.

<sup>iv</sup> Cisgender is used here to indicate the correspondence of sex assigned at birth with current gender identity.

<sup>v</sup> The term account refers to text and images extracted from differing locations. 'Account' refers to the whole section of text (e.g. one blog post, one person's interview in a film, one webpage on a website). 'Extract' refers to an excerpt from the whole.

<sup>vi</sup> There are also critical voices in this sphere, which needs exploring elsewhere.

<sup>vii</sup> DP arose from Potter and Wetherell's (1987) book and collaborative data sessions at Loughborough. Whereas the book supported a broader form of DA, DP prioritises a fine-grained analysis of talk in social interaction (influenced by Wittgenstein, Goffman, Garfinkel & ethnomethodology, Sacks & CA). DP also challenged cognitivism – the way in which behaviour was located in the mind or personality of individual – in psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992).

<sup>viii</sup> It is possible that there are other forms of privilege at work here, including the dominance of middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied women, which also requires further interrogation.