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What is it to mother without children?

On repeat I play, Good Job. I am exhausted, I'm home late, I cook, I clean. I hear, You're the engine that makes all things go... always in disguise, my hero... You're doing a good job. The day was long: I am caregiving for students during COVID, I am caregiving for my spouse post-surgery, I am navigating infertility in the background. All while quietly singing, you're doing a good job. I crawl in bed, tired. I text my mom. I save a picture she sent me. To myself I whisper, You'll want that, you'll want everything she ever made. I worry for her cancer. I look at a registry for a pregnant friend. I push away reminders of lost pregnancies, despite a current pregnancy. I reply to a friend in solidarity about infertility. I reply to another struggling with the excesses of being a working mom.

I have been mothered and been mothering all day.
I have a mother. I am not yet a mother.

Care and motherhood organize so much of social, domestic, political, and cultural life. In this work, I consider caregiving without the social capital of motherhood. I ask, what is it to mother without children? What is it to give constant care while grieving the ambiguous loss of miscarriage? What does it mean to grieve the possibility of motherhood? Why are people compelled to yearn for a role whose labor is invisible and uncounted? To answer these questions, I trace parallel discourses of motherhood and caregiving as they appear on Instagram in pregnancy loss/illness communities. Using these data, I disentangle care and motherhood to illuminate the complexity of discourses that frame the competing demands to be a mother (or not) and inhabit and represent that care according to gendered narratives that value the sacrifices caregivers make.

Samira Rajabi is an assistant professor of Media Studies at the University of Colorado. Her work focuses on trauma, grief, digital media and gender.