LABOUR CONTROL AND RESISTANCE AMONG MIGRANT REMOTE WORKERS

SPATIAL SHIFTS, WORKER RIFTS:

LABOUR CONTROL AND RESISTANCE AMONG MIGRANT REMOTE WORKERS IN NORTHEASTERN ONTARIO AND THE MARITIMES

By BONNIE EVANS, B.A. (Hons)

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Lay Abstract:

Based on interviews with 27 Canadian remote workers who moved to northeastern Ontario or the Maritimes between 2020 and 2024, this research looks at how working remotely, and at a distance, influences how employers manage workers and how workers push back. This is a valuable research contribution, as the migration of remote workers within Canada and how white-collar, non-unionized workers respond to employer control are understudied topics.

Findings show that many migrant remote workers use physical distance to avoid employer oversight. At the same time, employers use remote technologies to monitor and influence workers from afar. Many workers also respond with resistance when their choice to work remotely is threatened. Although many participants say they feel “in control” of their work, this sense of autonomy can hide more subtle forms of control.

Abstract:

The rise of remote work during and after the COVID-19 pandemic drove many workers to migrate from large metropolitan areas to smaller, more rural regions, enabled by the detachment of work from the physical office. Using interview data from 27 Canadian remote workers who migrated to northeastern Ontario or the Maritimes between 2020-2024, this study contributes to the larger body of remote work literature by investigating how working remotely, and at a distance, affects labour control and resistance dynamics. This thesis contributes a worker-centered perspective to remote work literature, which is often shaped by a productivity bias rooted in employer-focused fields. It also fills key gaps by exploring effects of internal migration on control and resistance among white-collar, non-unionized remote workers—topics that remain largely underexamined.

Data from participant interviews yielded several key insights about migrant remote workers. They often use spatial distance as a tool to avoid employer control. However, their employers also utilize remote workplace technologies to increase surveillance and exert casual control from afar. Many migrant remote workers also indicate that when their spatial autonomy is threatened, they may respond with acts of individual or collective resistance. Finally, while many workers describe feeling highly productive and "in control" of their work, these accounts reveal a fallacy in perceived control, as this sense of autonomy often masks deeper forms of employer oversight.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The world of work has been undoubtedly transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among its most lasting effects is the proliferation of remote work, particularly among white-collar workers. The effects of remote work are intrinsically spatial, as this form of work expands the boundaries of one's work site beyond a physical office space (OPM n.d.). This boundary extension allows remote workers to move while retaining their jobs. Some posit that the large-scale uptake in remote work drove migration as well. In fact, 2.4% of Americans reported moving because of remote work between 2020-2022 (Ozimek 2022). Remote workers also moved to locales no longer commutable to their physical work location, with 28% of people who moved or planned to move noting that their intended location was more than 4 hours away (Ozimek 2022).

This pattern was reflected in regions of Canada as well. The pandemic prompted a reversal of internal migration patterns in northeastern Ontario and the Maritimes after decades of population decline in these areas (Statistics Canada 2022; Campaigne 2022). Graeme Bruce (2022), a data and graphics producer for CBC News, explains that this is in part because remote workers were moving out of high-population hubs in search of affordable housing and broader lifestyle changes once work no longer bound them to the city. Between 2020 and 2021, Toronto was the only major Canadian city to see more residents move out than move in; it is, relatedly, a central hub for the nation's housing crisis (Bruce 2022).

Both remote work and the migration of Canadians to more rural areas appear to be here to stay. At the peak of pandemic-related remote work in May 2021, just over 24.3% of Canadians worked primarily from home; as of 2024, this percentage remained relatively high with 18.7% of Canadians still working primarily from home (Samfiru 2024; Statistics Canada 2024). In 2024,

80% of Canadians noted a preference to spend at least half their work hours at home, reflecting a continued desire for remote work (Samfiru 2024; Statistics Canada 2024). The trend of people leaving more densely populated areas also appears to be ongoing—Ontario, the most populous province, has experienced net population losses to more rural regions for sixteen straight quarters as of May 2024 (Labrecque 2024).

The shift to remote work has transformed not only the location(s) of work, but also how it is managed and controlled. As the boundaries between personal and professional spaces blur, workers face new forms of labour control that extend beyond traditional office oversight. Remote work has enabled employers to rely more heavily on digital surveillance tools, tracking productivity through software that monitors employee activity, keystrokes, and time spent on individual tasks (Suarez 2022). Beyond overt surveillance, employers are finding ways to exert normative control over workers, like building trust to instill organizational commitment from the employee (Downes et al 2024; Colling & Ceulemans 2023).

Remote work also presents new challenges for worker advocacy. Remote work concurrently promotes isolation and prevents organizing capacity, while still encouraging workers to adhere to a strong work ethic (Birch 2022). In these ways, the remote work model is at odds with the practical aspirations of the labour movement. What workers perceive as the benefits of remote work may simply be deregulation and increased precarity masked as job autonomy (Castillo Fernández 2023). The digitization and individuation of remote work often pull costs away from employers and put workers into less stable work arrangements, giving reason to be skeptical about its long-term benefits to workers (Castillo Fernández 2023).

On the other hand, remote work has also provided new sites for workers to resist employer control. The potential for resistance may be amplified by the rise of digital platforms

and social networks that facilitate collective action, enabling workers to organize across locations and sectors, even without a physical workplace (Whang, 2022). Individual resistance is a prominent response within remote work contexts as well; quiet quitting (employees doing the bare minimum for their job without extra effort or contribution) and the Great Resignation are examples of remote worker resistance that occur at an individual level but reflect larger cultural movements to resist hustle culture, recalibrate their disrupted work-life balance, maintain their well-being, and/or oppose employer mandates to return to work (Aydin & Azizoğlu 2022; Formica & Sfodera 2022). These new opportunities for resistance may challenge traditional models of control and potentially reshape power dynamics in the workforce in favor of remote workers.

With this demonstrated pattern of migration of remote workers to more rural areas in Canada, it is valuable to assess how this pattern may affect control and resistance dynamics. Housing prices continue to rise in city centres, meaning this migration trend may continue for remote workers in search of home ownership (Villamayor 2025). This migration could also lead to intriguing outcomes regarding resistance, as workers may use the increased distance from their employer to challenge employer control. This is an important topic to investigate regardless of if and how these migrant remote workers exercise resistance, as it may have implications on organized labour in the future. For example, what options exist for building power when workers are spatially scattered without a physical work center?

This thesis seeks to explore these phenomena by asking: **How do migrant, remote workers experience control and resistance dynamics?** I aim to answer this question in my thesis by assessing existent literature and analyzing qualitative data from migrant remote (or formerly remote) workers living in northeastern Ontario and the Maritimes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Although remote work has been studied by labor and management researchers well before 2020, its rapid expansion during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly boosted research on the topic. In her meta-analysis of remote work articles, Ropponen (2025) found that the number of articles regarding remote work rose from 1–10 per year from 1990 to 2019 to 346–470 per year in 2021 to 2023. It is important to note that "remote work" has been variously termed, including "working from home", "mobile working", or "telework"; while these terms are not identical in their definitions, they overlap significantly in the literature and at times are used interchangeably (Felstead 2022). I will be using the term "remote worker" to indicate someone for whom most of their paid work is performed off-site or at home (Felstead 2022).

This chapter presents a focused review of the literature, as my thesis specifically examines control and resistance dynamics among remote workers. There is a significant amount of literature that is preoccupied with the degree to which remote work provides autonomy, as well as its benefits and drawbacks for workers. There, too, exists meaningful discussion about forms of employer control within remote work. Considerably less research exists regarding worker resistance within this framework—how remote workers (particularly white-collar), individually or collectively, resist these mechanisms of control, apart from platform and app-based workers. This chapter explores these bodies of literature, providing the groundwork for my research and its empirical contributions.

Remote Worker Autonomy

There is a great deal of research about autonomy and its effects on worker well-being and productivity, with much of it situated in industrial relations or human resources literature. For workers, autonomy refers to the degree of freedom and control they have in deciding the

methods used to complete their work, as well as the circumstances under which they complete it (Hackman & Oldham 1975). Empirical findings suggest that enhancing employees' sense of autonomy in how they perform their work, including timing and location, can lead to improved well-being and have positive effects on productivity and performance (Terry 2022; Hackney et al. 2022).

The key forms of autonomy discussed in remote work literature are spatial and temporal autonomy. Spatial autonomy denotes the ways that remote workers have the freedom to determine their work location, while temporal autonomy refers to the freedom to determine one's working hours including schedule flexibility and flextime which provides employees the ability to manage their working hours concerning their personal needs (Baltes et al 1999). Other forms of autonomy that have been subject to less study in the remote work landscape than spatial and temporal are decision-making autonomy (an employee can independently make decisions that lead to solving a problem) and work-method autonomy (gives an employee the power to decide how they want to solve a problem) (Lange & Kayser 2022).

Debates on Autonomy

Many studies reflect that autonomy is a key, positive factor in worker experience, enhancing job satisfaction among many remote workers (Rubin & Spivak 2012). In a study of 319 academic knowledge workers by Spivack and Milosevic (2018), results suggest that perceived spatial autonomy acts as a form of empowerment that enhances worker well-being. Another study bolstering the positive impacts of spatial autonomy on worker experience found that, among 127 participants working at a Chinese IT company that allowed employees to choose their work location daily amid the pandemic, lack of choice in work location was a primary stressor for workers (Shao et al 2021). This suggests that employees desire the flexibility to work

where they want based on their needs—something that may be relevant for the group of workers in my study as they have moved to their new communities.

Scholars also note that the elimination of commutes via spatial autonomy can lead to improved community engagement and reduced loneliness (Soroui 2021). Job autonomy was found to be negatively related to loneliness in a study of over 500 Chinese workers, indicating that it can foster proactive motivation to connect with others and reduce feelings of isolation (Wang et al 2021). This claim is bolstered in a study by Somasundram et al (2022) examining changes in the mental and physical well-being of Canadian employees in 2020 and 2021 working from home; lower stress and burnout levels were reported overall and were linked to improved co-worker support, with respondents reporting increased feedback, help, and a stronger sense of community with colleagues. Some remote workers also seek substitutes for organizational belonging by forming meaningful connections outside work, thereby enhancing their community life (Belle 2014).

Remote workers across several studies also appear to have more discretionary time via temporal autonomy. In interviews with 25 employees of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in the UK, participants noted that remote working gave them more free time, saying that they "don't need to commute… don't need to kind of dress as you would for the office… don't need to think about planning your lunch...you can go out and exercise or to the shops in the middle of the day...all that freedom" (Brooks et al 2022, p. 9). For many, remote work allows them to fit day-to-day household tasks, free time for relaxing, and taking part in hobbies or self-care activities into their work schedule (Brooks et al 2022; Boccoli et al 2022).

Temporal autonomy as a factor of job satisfaction is crucial, as another study by Dilmaghani (2021) of over 7,000 Canadian workers found that time flexibility alone or combined

with location flexibility improves job and work-life satisfaction, while working from home without the ability to control their time does not enhance well-being. Additional research suggests that spatial autonomy and temporal autonomy are linked, as the ability to choose one's workplace can translate into greater temporal control (Jarrahi et al 2021; Dunn et al 2023). These liberties afforded by remote work are an enticing prospect for workers to gain more control and satisfaction in their work process.

Studies on decision-making and work-method autonomy also indicate their correlation with worker well-being. In separate studies of 1,153 Brazilian remote workers and 5,163 German remote workers, results showed that workers perceived an increased level of self-efficacy—encompassing these forms of autonomy—when working remotely and that their work stress levels fell in turn (da Silva et al 2022; Lange & Kayser 2022).

While much of the research on the effects of autonomy on remote workers points to positive outcomes for their work experience and well-being, other perspectives point to mixed effects and negative implications for workers. A review by Westbrook (2023) of over 40 remote work-related articles further cements the importance of autonomy. She seeks to explore the strengths and weaknesses of mandated remote work during the onset of the pandemic for both employees and employers in her review. She reveals that a key theme for increased employee well-being is autonomy. However, when mandated under COVID-19, conditions such as blurred boundaries between work and home, childcare and home duties, an extended workday, family conflict, and a lack of transition between office and home in remote work negatively impacted worker well-being (Westbrook 2023). A qualitative analysis of 30 remote knowledge workers in the UK expands on this finding, revealing that while workers enjoy increased autonomy and

discretion, they also face work intensification and blurred boundaries between work and personal life, even when remote work is not mandated (Abgeller et al 2024**).**

This blurring of work-life boundaries resulting from the autonomy of remote work can also lead to isolation and anxiety (Ewers & Kangmennaang 2023). Another study on teleworkers' sense of belonging highlighted the emotional impact of threatened group cohesion when leaving the physical workplace to work remotely, with one participant noting colleagues' efforts to prevent his shift to remote work (Belle 2014). For those working remotely while other coworkers are in the office, distance weakens two-way communication and interpersonal relationships, and remote workers have fewer opportunities to share their opinions due to reduced supervisor engagement (Tavenner Jr 2019). This further erodes relationships with co-workers, compounded by the fact that remote workers already have more uncertainty about job expectations, a lack of sufficient feedback, and a lack of social support (Sardeshmukh et al 2012; Lee 2018). Autonomy in this case signals disengagement and dissatisfaction for remote workers.

While aforementioned studies have noted deceased loneliness via remote worker autonomy (Belle 2014; Somasundram et al 2022; Soroui 2021; Wang et al 2021), other studies present contrasting claims. A recent Gallup report using data from over 100,000 employees around the world indicates that 25% of fully remote employees report feeling "a lot of loneliness the previous day" versus 16% for those working fully on-site; hybrid workers rest in between at 21% (2024). Isolation in remote work is also documented across several studies of worker well-being during the beginning of the pandemic, though this may be less compelling as these results were collected during a period of mandatory (i.e. not autonomous) remote work (Babapour Chafi et al 2021; Galanti et al 2021; de Klerk et al 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo 2021).

Autonomy is also experienced differently depending on the worker and the workplace. In remote worker surveys, managers and self-employed individuals report greater autonomy compared to non-managers, and those with multiple jobs are 59% more likely to experience lack of control (Ewers & Kangmennaang 2023). Remote employees in managerial positions also appear to have greater flexibility in structuring work time, suggesting that occupational status and management regimes moderate access to temporal flexibility (Soroui 2021).

While there is obvious deliberation (and often contradictory study results) on whether autonomy in remote work is positive or negative for remote worker well-being, it does appear that it is what workers want despite its flaws. Remote work remains a preferred option for many with 80% of Canadian workers preferring to spend at least half their work hours at home (Samfiru 2024; Statistics Canada 2024). Though it is not a one-size-fits-all model, and workers experience varied levels of autonomy, remote work does appear to be favored and here to stay (Ewers & Kangmennaang 2023).

Labour Control in Remote Work

There is less research about labour control in remote work than autonomy. What research exists shows that employers utilize both overt and subtle methods of control to extract productivity from remote workers. Despite worker preferences for remote work, attitudes among many employers have reflected distrust related to remote work, with managers fearing reduced control and coordination in telework, leading to "moral hazard" concerns like lower productivity despite evidence showing little (or even positive) impact on productivity pre-pandemic (Grzegorczyk et al 2021). Among managers, 38% suspect remote workers perform worse than on-site workers, and remote work is reserved more for senior roles and skilled professionals than younger workers (Grzegorczyk et al 2021). A 2022 survey also found that 92% of executives at

medium to large firms think workers who turn cameras off during meetings "don't have long-term futures at the company" (Suarez 2022).

In their desire to control remote workers in response to this distrust, employers have pursued diverse forms of labour control. . Labour control is a key concept in labour process theory (LPT), which originates from Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974). In this work, Braverman (1974) examines how scientific management techniques restructured work by dividing it into planning and execution, assigning the former to managerial roles. In defining LPT, he argues that such workplace changes are part of a broader historical trend, wherein capitalism reshapes dominant forces, yet dependably follows a logic that prioritizes capitalist interests—reinforcing managerial authority to reduce costs and improve productivity (Braverman 1974; Omidi et al 2023). Labour control can be defined as the methods by which employers enforce these capital interests in the workplace, directly involving workers' activities in the process.

Labour control can manifest in various forms. One form is restrictive or *direct control*, in which the workplace is restructured to enforce discipline, often through the fragmentation of tasks or heightened supervision (Fishwick 2019). Another is co-optive or *normative control*, which aims to gain worker compliance through changes in the labour processes by fostering collaboration and shared decision-making (Fishwick 2019). Both forms of control are implicated in remote work, with direct control encompassing remote surveillance (heightened supervision) and normative control encompassing control through organizational culture (adherence to organizational values and commitment to the organization) (Colling & Ceulemans 2023; Fishwick 2019).

Regarding direct labour control in remote work, spending on surveillance software has more than doubled since the onset of the pandemic as in-person management (e.g. walking around the office) is not feasible when people are working remotely. Employers of remote workers have implemented forms of digital monitoring, including tracking keystrokes, monitoring time spent on websites, video recording in workers' homes, and taking screenshots of employees' computers on a repeated timer (Aloisi & de Stefano 2022; Suarez 2022). Aloisi and De Stefano (2022) indicate that these forms of monitoring are new not in form but scope and intensity, including the normalization and context in which these surveillance technologies are being deployed—surveillance that was once limited to blue-collar or low-wage work has been exported to white-collar, remote workers through digital means, representing a qualitative shift in managerial control.

There is evidence that such remote monitoring can lead to the centralization of decision-making and contribute to lower creativity among employees working at lower organizational levels (Kniffin et al 2021). Direct control also encompasses more casual forms of supervision, such as "attitude monitoring" from managers. In a study of remote managers, Downes et al (2023) reveal that managers monitor their team's work output by paying attention to team attitudes, such as how communicative they are in Slack and watching their behavior in video meetings. Employers have used these methods to carry direct control into remote work settings, maintaining close managerial oversight despite physical distance.

Through normative control, employers stoke an internalized commitment to the organization among workers, leading workers themselves to maximize productivity and police their actions in the workplace (Colling & Ceulemans 2023). Several articles explore how workers "consent to their demise" via self-exploitation in remote work settings (Bromfield 2022;

Chung 2022; Gottfried & Burawoy 2001). Workers self-exploit through being constantly available, losing their worker subjectivity, and maximizing their productivity while bearing the costs of production from the employer (Bromfield, 2022; Wang et al 2021; Aloisi & de Stefano 2022).

Scholars argue that this self-exploitation stymies the benefits of autonomy for remote workers, as it does not foster truly autonomous workers (Delfino & Van Der Kolk 2021; Sewell & Taskin 2015). Instead, there is a reordering of control that limits both professional and technical remote workers' freedoms, simply repackaging norms associated with traditional workplaces like visibility, presence, trust, and availability (Sewell & Taskin 2015). This suggests that the emancipatory potential of remote work may be overstated. When, for example, an employee must negotiate with their boss to have lunch with their child to avoid unwanted calls during that time, there is a clear tension between the experience of the workplace and home (Sewell & Taskin 2015).

Other research suggests that remote employees feel pressure to engage in "voluntary visibilizing practices" like working overtime to ensure they are recognized by their superiors (Delfino & Van Der Kolk 2021). These findings reflect a possible strengthening of a hierarchical control relationship between the remote worker and their project leader, as this relationship may have been weaker when work was conducted in person (Sewell & Taskin 2015). These points highlight that remote workers can create guardrails and reinforce power structures themselves via normative control, even when given multiple forms of autonomy at work.

Some studies also suggest that work-home interference (i.e. negative interaction between work and home life, in which pressures from one domain make it difficult to fulfill responsibilities in the other) is not mitigated by higher job autonomy, either due to the universal

nature of remote work or the unique dynamics of home-work conflict—a conflict that may be self-induced if workers struggle to maintain boundaries (Van Hoof et al 2006; Wang et al 2021). Grzegorczyk et al (2021) also find that the fear of falling behind on-site colleagues prevents workers from fully embracing remote work, resulting in a "prisoner's dilemma" where, without coordination, employees work remotely less than they desire.

Existing research also shows that labour control in remote work is efficient because it yields higher productivity; productivity growth for companies in 2019–22 is positively associated with the rise in the percentage of remote workers in those companies, even after accounting for pre-pandemic trends in productivity (Pabilonia & Redmond 2024). In one study of the productivity effects of workers moving from a work-from-home to a work-from-anywhere structure at a United States government-affiliated office, researchers found a 4.4% increase in work output under work-from-anywhere compared to work-from-home (Choudhury et al 2021).

This sentiment is echoed by a review of articles published during and before the COVID-19 pandemic, in which 79% demonstrated that remote work increased productivity and performance when the work location was discretionary compared to only 23% when mandatory (Hackney 2022). These authors argue that spatial autonomy in remote work results in measurable productivity gains for remote workers—something worth considering in this study as the participants have utilized their spatial autonomy to migrate to new locations. While workers often use these heightened productivity findings to advocate for the right to work remotely, it also reflects the efficacy of remote labour control.

A more recently theorized form of labour control is neo-normative control. While it shares the goal of normative control for workers to internalize productivity goals, neo-normative control promotes normative diversity rather than complete conformity—encouraging employees

to bring their authentic, outside-of-work selves into the workplace, rather than only displaying a polished corporate persona (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Sturdy et al 2010). Congruently, eo-normative control allows us to conceptualize the appeal to autonomy as a labour control mechanism (Morales & Stecher 2023).

Companies may actively promote the image of remote workers as autonomous, framing flexibility and self-direction as empowering—even while subtly steering behavior toward organizational goals (Morales & Stecher 2023). Morales and Stecher (2023) apply this idea to gig workers using platform-based apps, showing how companies leverage workers' desire for autonomy by giving them control over how they operate the apps and structure their work themselves (decision-making and work-method autonomy). Although the migrant remote workers in this study are not gig workers, the autonomy they exercise in their roles—such their relocation—may similarly be interpreted as a neo-normative control strategy. It may allow them to feel a sense of self-actualization outside of work through moving, while still aligning their efforts with the organizational interests.

Remote Worker Resistance

Remote workers also demonstrate resistance to labour control through collective and individual means, though this is a smaller body of research beyond the scope of platform workers. Resistance in this case refers to "anything [workers] consciously are, do and think at work that [they] are not supposed to be, do and think and which is directed upwards through the organizational hierarchy" (Karlsson 2012, p. 185). In relation to labour control, this would also encompass actions that do *not* serve to maximize productivity (or even seek to minimize it).

Despite an initial downturn in the COVID-19 lockdown, workers regained power in a strong job market, with many switching roles to secure higher pay and improved working

conditions—including greater flexibility in hours and location (Salon et al 2022). This shift empowered workers to push back against employers' desires for a full return to the office, compelling many organizations to compromise by allowing continued telecommuting to retain talent (Salon et al 2022).

Cases like the strike by PSAC union workers in Canada demonstrate worker resistance being exercised when the right to work remotely is challenged. In April 2023, over 150,000 federal workers went on strike with the union, and one of their key contentions surrounded the employer mandate that workers return to the office at least two days a week (Scherer 2023). The strike was ultimately only partially successful, with their asks put into a non-binding letter of agreement with the employer, but it demonstrated that remote workers were compelled to act collectively in support of remote work on their terms (Morrison 2023). While this strike took place within an already established union framework, it still sparks interest in how remote workers may collectively resist labour control.

Another example of collective resistance within white-collar remote work includes remote worker union organizing like that of Collective Action in Tech. These efforts include freelancers voicing their opposition to fee increases via social media, turning online spaces into places for the collective voicing of outrage, and remote unionization using technology platforms like Slack and Google Calendar (Whang 2022). Other collective resistance movements include the mobilization of gig workers, but as these workers are still place-bound and more precarious than my research sample, it is less relevant to my research (Joyce & Stuart 2021; Tronsor 2018).

Regarding individual resistance among remote workers (with exception of gig and platform-based workers), existing literature largely centers on two phenomena: quiet quitting and the Great Resignation (Formica & Sfodera 2022). Quiet quitting refers to employees limiting

their efforts to only the tasks explicitly outlined in their job descriptions, refusing to take on additional, pressured responsibilities (Harter 2022). A study of Swedish workers across different industries found that remote work often led to reduced support and feedback from managers and colleagues, along with lower team cohesion—factors that decreased motivation and contributed to increased instances of quiet quitting (Landin et al 2023). The Great Resignation describes the wave of over 47 million Americans who have voluntarily quit or changed jobs after the onset of the pandemic, often in response to return-to-office mandates (Formica & Sfodera 2022; Fuller & Kerr 2022). These forms of individual resistance by remote workers were driven by frustration with increased managerial surveillance, perceived disrespect, rigid schedules, and a broader lack of perceived control in the workplace (Aydin & Azizoğlu 2022; Formica & Sfodera 2022).

Indeed, there is limited research about both collective and individual resistance among non-platform remote workers. Inquiry into resistant action taken by white-collar, non-unionized remote workers in my research serves to bolster this literature and potentially fill a gap.

Gaps in Literature

This thesis makes several contributions to the current literature on remote workers. Many articles related to workers' experience doing remote labour have a productivity bias, meaning that a posited *benefit* of remote work is increased productivity. This is likely due to the publication of many sources in industrial relations, management, or other employer-focused journals. By focusing on workers' experiences in their own words from a labour process lens, I hope to contribute another study to the worker-centered angle of the remote work conversation.

There is scant literature on both resistance among white-collar, non-unionized remote workers and internal migration of remote workers. There is also almost no existing literature on remote worker migration outside of the context of digital nomads (i.e. remote workers who

leverage their spatial flexibility to travel, often having no defined "home base") (Cook 2023). Any remote work-related sources with relevant information are also from outside of the Canadian context or precede the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, remote worker migration may lead to interesting outcomes in relation to resistance, as workers may (or may not) use the added distance from their employer as a tool to resist employer control.

There is little literature about control and resistance dynamics in this specific type of remote worker—a white-collar worker that migrated to a more rural community during COVID, often facilitated by their job being remote. By looking at the effects of migration on this group, and adopting a control/resistance lens, I hope to help fill this gap.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

To assess the dynamics of control and resistance in distanced remote work, I interviewed remote workers who relocated to two regions within the past five years: northeastern Ontario and the Maritimes, both regions that had seen reversals in migration patterns after long periods of population decline (Statistics Canada 2022; Campaigne 2022). This was significant in relation to remote work, as many of those who moved to these regions were remote workers and utilized their spatial flexibility to move (Jokinen 2022; LeBel 2024). I used a qualitative approach, analyzing narrative interviews with 27 remote workers.

SSHRC Research Context

My research formed part of a larger research project, *The future of work and inter-regional migration to Canada's resource peripheries*, funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant and led by Dr. Suzanne Mills (McMaster University) with co-investigators Dr. Kathrine Mazer (Acadia University) and Dr. Michael Haan (University of Western Ontario). The project examines how changes in the world of work influenced workers' decisions to move to more rural areas and explores the impact of internal migration on the social reproduction, work, and livelihoods of both those who moved to new areas and the residents of these areas. The research draws on narrative interviews with 57 internal migrants to northeastern Ontario and the Maritimes to investigate the role remote work played in their move. Of these, 27 had worked or were actively working remotely at the time of their interviews. This context is necessary as the work conducted under the SSHRC grant overlaps greatly with my research methods, and I will reference it within this chapter.

To explore remote workers' control and resistance dynamics, I added questions to the migrant interview schedules specific to remote workers. I added one all-encompassing question

with seven sub-questions meant to prompt the interviewee to the remote worker schedule. These included personal assessments of the advantages and challenges of remote work, one's ability to connect with work colleagues, the capacity to control their work schedule and location, and whether employer surveillance was used in their workplace (Appendix A).

Recruitment and Methods

All participants in my study met the selection criteria for the larger SSHRC study: they were over the age of 18; had moved to the region of study from another region in Canada; stated that moving to the region of study was a choice; had moved to the region of study after 2019; and had not moved to the region of study for a local job. Participants in my portion of the study also needed to have been currently or formerly employed as remote workers at some point while living in their new community.

Participants were recruited using SSHRC project tactics: virtual and physical public advertisements, word of mouth, and e-mail. I printed and distributed physical posters in local libraries and other public buildings with email contact information for the research team and posted advertisements on social media—predominantly local, community-oriented Facebook groups—including the same information. Most participants reached out to the research team via e-mail to confirm their eligibility before scheduling an interview with a member of the research team. Once I began interviewing participants, I also relied on snowball sampling to acquire additional interviewees. As a member of the research team, I conducted 32 of the 57 SSHRC interviews—26 in person in northeastern Ontario and 6 over Zoom. The remaining interviews in northeastern Ontario and the Maritimes were conducted by other members of the research team. In total, I acquired interview data for my thesis from 27 participants across both regions.

I conducted narrative interviews for this research, which provided me an opportunity to

center participants' personal stories of their relationship to remote work and workplace-related autonomy and control (Clandinin, 2013). Additionally, in contrast to a highly structured interview where there is little room to deviate, a more open-ended, semi-structured interview style maintains some structural integrity with an interview question guide, while also allowing the interview topics to stray and make the interaction more conversational. By doing this, the participants had more room to talk about whatever they found most relevant depending on their own life experiences (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2010).

All of my interviews took place from June to October 2024. Most interviews were conducted in person (21), but 6 were conducted over remote platforms including Zoom (4), Teams (1), and the telephone (1). In-person and phone interviews were taped on a handheld audio recorder to document the interview, while Zoom or Teams-mediated interviews were recorded using the audio recording software features of each respective platform. Audio recordings were uploaded by the interviewer (myself or other members of the research team) to MacDrive (McMaster University's Enterprise File Synchronization and Sharing solution) as soon as possible after the interview and then deleted from the digital recorder to maintain security. The files were named by participant pseudonyms, which were assigned before the interview. These pseudonyms alongside real participant information were saved in a password-protected file on MacDrive to maintain security for identifying information. Audio recordings from in-person and phone interviews were transcribed manually by research team members. Virtual interviews on Zoom and Teams were transcribed using the automatic transcription feature built into the software and then checked for accuracy and formatting by research team members.

Positionality

Being part of the white-collar remote workforce and an active knowledge worker as a

postsecondary research assistant, I already possessed familiarity with many participants' work experiences. This common ground proved advantageous in reducing social distance between myself and many respondents, thereby mitigating interview bias and enhancing the effectiveness of the research process (Williams Jr 1964).

While I share certain in-group identities with the individuals I interviewed, it's crucial to acknowledge and address any biases I brought to this research. The threat potential of interview questions is also related to interview bias, and some questions that I asked regarding how agency and resistance manifest in their work life may have caused them to feel pressure or discomfort in challenging traditional, productive worker conventions (Williams Jr 1964). As someone who is skeptical of the benefits of remote work and the increased neo-liberalization of work, I also did my best to ensure that my personal biases did not come through in the ways I engaged with interviewees, remembering that my task was to listen and understand the viewpoint of the participants (Taherdoost 2022). I engaged in peer debriefing frequently with colleagues and my supervisor to critically examine how my positionality might influence the way I frame questions, interpret responses, or engage with participants.

Data Analysis

Participants included both women (n=18) and men (n=9) ranging in age from 20-30 years old to 60-70 years old with varied jobs in varied industries at the time of the interview (Table 1). Six participants had left their remote jobs after moving as well. Participants were living at the time of the interview in northeastern Ontario (n=11) or the Maritimes (n=16), but their locations are not listed in Table 1 for anonymity. There were additionally no significant differences in research findings dependent on their region, so these groups were analyzed together.

***Table 1**: Participant Overview*

Participant Alias & Code	Gender	Age Range	Remote Job Title	Left Remote Job
Alice, P1	Woman	40-50	Labour Relations Officer	No
Brandon, P2	Man	40-50	Division Manager	No
Carrie, P3	Woman	30-40	Teaching Assistant	Yes
Deborah, P4	Woman	40-50	Senior IT Project Manager	No
Eva, P5	Woman	30-40	International Travel Agent	No
Franny, P6	Woman	40-50	Communications Advisor	No
Gregory, P7	Man	40-50	Creative Technologist	Yes
Helen, P8	Woman	30-40	Project Manager	No
Iris, P9	Woman	60-70	Advertising Writer	Yes
Joselyn, P10	Woman	50-60	Web Writer	No
Kelly, P11	Woman	50-60	Director of Sales Operations	No
Lance, P12	Man	20-30	Customer/Project Support	No
Matthew, P13	Man	30-40	Planning Analyst	No
Noah, P14	Man	60-70	Mechanical Designer	No
Olivia, P15	Woman	30-40	Data Analyst	No
Patricia, P16	Woman	30-40	Product Designer	No
Quinton, P17	Man	40-50	Development & Operations	No
Rachel, P18	Woman	30-40	Administrative Assistant	Yes
Seth, P19	Man	30-40	Campaign Manager	No
Talia, P20	Woman	40-50	Manager Partner Relations	No
Victor, P21	Man	40-50	Senior Campaign Writer	No
Wendy, P22	Woman	50-60	Director	No
Yvette, P23	Woman	40-50	Business Manager	Yes
Zoe, P24	Woman	30-40	Marketing and Events Manager	No
Adam, P25	Man	40-50	Director of Programs, Food Service Consultant	No

Catherine, P26	Woman	40-50	Technical Lead	No
Diana, P27	Woman	40-50	Professional Development Program Manager	Yes

I deductively developed themes for qualitative coding drawing on existing literature related to my original research questions. Originally developed themes included: Positive impressions/experiences of remote work, Negative impressions/experiences of remote work, Temporal autonomy, Spatial autonomy, Employer control, Work-life balance, Work relationships, Subversion of the Workday, Reinforcement of Workday, and Trade-offs of Remote Work (Table 2). Positive and Negative Impressions/Experiences of remote work served as high-level codes that often overlapped with other codes to create a more vivid impression of how each participant interpreted their experiences with remote work.

I uploaded the relevant transcripts and codes into a qualitative analysis software, NVivo, where I was able to highlight and pull direct quotes from the texts that corresponded to these developed categories. The advantage of using secure software to code the raw data is that it allowed me to better organize these themes and retrieve this information (Talanquer 2004). After initially coding the data, I refined my research question and scope into what is posed in this thesis (*How do migrant, remote workers experience control and resistance dynamics?*), partially in response to patterns emerging from the interviews. As my project developed, I re-coded existing quotes within each theme, homing in more specifically on Direct Employer Control, Normative Employer Control, and Resistance (Table 2).

***Table 2**: Codes and Definitions*

	Code	**Definition**
First Round of Coding	Positive impressions/experiences	Any positive interpretation of remote work or life/circumstances related to remote work
	Negative impressions/experiences	Any negative interpretation of remote work or life/circumstances related to remote work
	Temporal autonomy	The participant has real and/or perceived control of their work schedule
	Spatial autonomy	The participant has real and/or perceived control of their work location
	Employer control	The employer exerts control (e.g. surveillance measures) over the participant's autonomy at work
	Subversion of workday	The participant subverts traditional expectations of the workday (e.g. "slacking off" intentionally), encompasses resistance
	Reinforcement of workday	The participant reinforces traditional expectations of the workday (e.g. emphasizing goals for high productivity)
	Work-life balance	The participant negotiates between their work life and their home life
	Work relationships	The participant discusses their relationships to coworkers, employer(s), or other work-related people
	Tradeoffs	The participant discusses the pros and cons of choosing remote work (e.g. what they gained and lost/why they chose it)
Second Round of Coding	Direct Control	Employer control exerted externally (surveillance, high communication to extract productivity, etc.)
	Normative Control	Employer control exerted internally (workers self-policing their productivity, praising their employer, etc.)
	Resistance	Worker actions that serve in opposition to employer control

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

In this section, I present the results of my qualitative analysis of 27 interviews with current or former remote workers who had worked remotely during at least some of their time post-move in their new community. Emergent themes among the migrant remote workers interviewed included: their use of spatial distance as a tool to avoid employer control; employers' use of remote workplace technology to increase surveillance and exert casual control over workers at a distance; their engagement in acts of individual or collective resistance in response to shifting spatial dynamics; and their accounts of heightened productivity while also feeling "in control" of their work, demonstrating a fallacy in perceived control. I explore these themes with more depth and connect them to participant data in this section.

Circumventing Labour Control via Distance from Employer

The first finding from my research is that spatial distance allows migrant remote workers to subvert or avoid direct labour control. Some migrant remote workers experienced a shift in labour control dynamics through reduced levels of supervision and lessened external pressure to engage in work that they don't feel is valuable. Gregory, formerly a creative technologist for an IT firm, describes his experience of subverted labour control in remote work:

> When I was working for a company, I had more control in some ways because I had to be more independent. There was less supervision, which was nice. Managers were less able to waste your time with meetings that nobody really needed. So yes, I think I gained control I'd say, through remote work (**P7**).

While at the time of the interview, he had shifted to working remotely as an independent contractor, he notes in his description of remote work for his former employer that he experienced decreased supervision and increased control over his work process in remote work. He compares the independence he felt in his remote work to the "wasted time" that in-person meetings held by managers at the company created. He describes the office culture differences

created by remote work in a formerly in-person workspace; namely, less direct employer control through supervision, and more autonomy in his work process at a distance.

Eva, an international travel agent contracted by multiple companies, shares her thoughts on the pressures she faced while working in a traditional office environment:

> I just feel like things pile on in a different way when you're working in an office than remote...someone's always asking you to do something. You know, so it's less flexible, right? And if you wanted to do something outside of your office, it's like, well, "is this your lunch break" or "where are you going?" ... there's a lot of questions, right? Versus now it's just kind of like, yeah, you come on when you come on and you finish, when you finish (**P5**).

In the office, Eva experienced constant oversight, as others frequently added tasks to her workload and questioned her actions, especially if they seemed unrelated to work. This created a sense of direct control over her time and space. In contrast, remote work has allowed her more freedom; she can manage her schedule without being so heavily monitored. She also emphasizes that in-person workers often feel pressured to conform to rigid office norms, especially when trying to exercise spatial and/or temporal autonomy by leaving the office. For Eva, working at a distance from her office helps her gain autonomy and avoid direct labour control.

Another interviewee named Adam notes that in his role as a director at a food services employer, moving to remote work created much-appreciated distance from his boss:

> And the problem in an office, of course, is just like I was saying about my boss, who is the VP. And how he just wanted to have conversations...he would just come in and talk your ear off, and he's your boss, so you can't say no. He would just open my door and be sitting on a chair, and you're...[thinking] like, "get out of my office"... So like remotely, you don't get that. You don't get those impromptu visits which is wonderful (**P25**).

Adam's comments highlight how working remotely allows him to escape the direct oversight of his boss. In the office, his supervisor could easily reach him at any time, and there was a normative expectation to be constantly available. By physically distancing himself from the

workplace, Adam gains more control over his time—his spatial separation from the office grants him greater temporal autonomy in his work because he can avoid this labour control mechanism.

Victor, a senior campaign writer for a postsecondary educational institution, emphasizes reduced direct and normative labour control in his remote work. When asked about how remote work affects his perceived control, he responds:

> ... when I was going into the office where I was, you know, as a writer, I'm not gonna write 8 hours a day and then I'm done, you know?... We got to the 3s and 4s [PM at the office] that we didn't have meetings, so you're doing performative tasks: cleaning your inbox, or maybe reading an article that was tangentially related to something that you were doing. But again, it was just like proving to others that you're working while you're at your desk. And whereas now I don't have to do that, the work that needs to be done is the work that needs to be done, and I do the work that needs to be done when it needs to be done (**P21**).

Victor exercises greater control over his work through physical distance, as remote work alleviates the need to engage in "performative tasks" often required in traditional office settings. These tasks—commonly referred to as "productivity theater"—involve activities designed to signal busyness and productivity, rather than contributing substantively to one's responsibilities (Visier 2023). Spatial separation from his employer and colleagues allows Victor to evade both the normative expectation to maintain constant appearances of productivity and the direct managerial oversight typical of in-person environments (e.g. boss walking around the office). As a result, he can complete "the work that needs to be done when it needs to be done" (P21), gaining autonomy in both his schedule and work environment.

One interviewee named Helen, a remote lab project manager within a postsecondary educational institution, gives a perspective that reinforces many of these points, but from a manager's point of view.

> ...losing track of people [is] a lot easier working remotely just because, you know, like everyone used to be [employer location]-based. And now, like, now, I don't even know where they're doing [student worker] placements half of the time, because...you don't

> have to be situated in [employer location], which they had to be before...I think there's a there's a big difference in terms of like the functioning of the lab...Productivity, I would say, because people would come in and...you know we would have our meetings, you know, our weekly meetings, and everyone was on top of everything that people were doing...Really, the connectedness is not there anymore. (**P8**).

She notes that without in-person student employees, productivity is negatively affected. Additionally, she comments on "losing track" of workers at a distance—specifically that having employees scattered in different locations and unbound to a physical workspace means that she loses effective connection as a manager. While we cannot affirm through this quote whether the lab employees themselves feel a greater sense of spatial and temporal control when working at a distance from their employer, Helen affirms that in her job, direct *employer* control was reduced through lessened productivity and decreased ability to monitor workers' activities through regular meetings.

Some interviewees also highlighted how distance from their employer helped them to remain unnoticed. When asked about the advantages of remote work in her new community over in-person work in her previous location, Talia, a manager at a large travel agency shares this:

> It's easier for me to work out now sometimes because I can just jump on my [stationary] bike and then start work...or "oh, it's a little slow this afternoon. I could jump on my bike this afternoon." I just did actually this morning, because I didn't have that much going on. So I was like, "I'm just going to jump on my bike for 45"... Don't tell my office. We go unnoticed every once in a while (**P20**).

And when asked if her employer utilizes any means of surveillance, she notes:

> We're on [Microsoft] Teams, so … I mean, I do the most [mouse] jiggling thing when I ride my bike to show—because if I was just on away all the time on Teams for sure, my boss would have been like, "Hey, what's going on?" (**P20**).

Talia's description of her workday shows that she enjoys the ability to integrate personal tasks like exercise into her workday, particularly when she feels that work is "slow". She enjoys the temporal autonomy afforded to her because of her spatial autonomy. She chose to move to a

new location where she would complete her work from home, and she is making the decision to hop on her stationary bike, discerning that the work is slow enough to justify this decision. However, she also recognizes that her employer may disapprove of her being unavailable for stretches of time, so she knowingly evades direct labour control via digital surveillance on Teams by jiggling her mouse to show her availability status as a way for her to "go unnoticed," as she specifies that her boss would inquire about her away status.

While Talia is somewhat restrained in the recounting of her evasion tactics ("Don't tell my office. We go unnoticed every once in a while.", P20), Matthew, a planning analyst for a large e-commerce platform, is overt in his disdain for his company and the ways he subverts productivity. When asked about how many hours he currently works, he notes:

> Contracted hours is 40 a week…I aim to work 10 hours a week… So my shift is eight to four? I don't think I've started at 8:00 in two years…my alarm is 7:56, I check Slack, hit snooze, go back to sleep...They want me to work hard, but don't think outside the box here. We need you to do what we tell you...Okay, well, I can do that in an hour. And then I've got 7 hours to do band shit and play video games…Or go and do something with my family? Right? (**P13**).

When questioned about the company's use of digital surveillance, he answers:

> [Company] has a low [surveillance level] compared to what I've heard...like they can look at our keystrokes, I think, but they don't. You can say whatever the fuck you want in Slack in a private message, and they don't care. I've never been pinged because my Slack [ststus] went to away... I've probably beaten like five video games on work time at least. So I'll play, and then I'll [go] like, oh, shit, [I need to] hit a trackpad so my screen saver doesn't come on. But I've forgotten and gone away for 3 hours, just left my computer and no one's ever been like "what's going on with your status?" (**P13**).

While it is apparent that Matthew's employer has the tools available to perform digital surveillance, he highlights that they are not used to the same degree as other employers, allowing him to be less vigilant about his mouse jiggling ("hit a trackpad", P13) to keep his screen active. He had already been working for this company for nearly four years at the time of this interview, demonstrating the level to which his goal to reclaim his time and go unnoticed doing little work

has been effective. He also actively speaks to his coworkers about the fact that he completes fewer hours of work than contracted ("capitalism has stolen time and money from everybody forever, so I steal as much as I fucking can from those greedy scumbags", P13) and encourages them to do the same; he recounts how his coworkers call him "seaweed" because he "just kind of float[s] around through everything and no one touches [him] or bothers [him]" (P13). His defiant attitude toward his employer and his low reported working hours also reflect that Matthew avoids falling into normative control in tandem with direct control.

It is apparent in reading these quotes that Talia and Matthew differ in their job scopes, perceived levels of employer surveillance, and general work philosophies. But despite these differences, Matthew and Talia both demonstrate their ability to go unnoticed, facilitated by spatial separation from their employer. They share the recognition that, when there is no substantive work to be done, they can spend their time on personally fulfilling tasks. They are working fewer continuous hours when at a distance from their employer because even though employers have introduced new forms of digital surveillance and control, both Talia and Matthew find ways to subvert these systems.

Migrant remote workers illustrate how spatial autonomy gained through physical distance from the workplace enables them to evade traditional mechanisms of labor control and, in turn, gain greater temporal autonomy. For these participants, remote work reshapes their relationship with performative labor and the control of their time. Talia and Matthew, for example, engage in "performative productivity" by subverting digital surveillance systems (or lack thereof), allowing them to appear active while spending time on personal activities. In contrast, Victor, Gregory, Adam, and Eva disengage from performance theater altogether by physically removing

themselves from the office environment, thereby escaping direct oversight and gaining a stronger sense of control over their daily routines.

While not all participants engage in explicitly resistive practices, they nonetheless benefit from the temporal autonomy afforded by their spatial separation from their employers and ability to evade labor control. This is particularly significant for migrant remote workers, as it may allow them to take greater advantage of the motivations behind their relocation such as proximity to nature, the ability to purchase a home, or access to larger living spaces.

Heightened Labour Control via Workplace Technology

In contrast to the labour control evasion that some experienced, other workers experienced employer control through technological surveillance and/or heightened communication over digital platforms.

In more extreme cases of heightened control, remote workers are put under strict surveillance, having to track their activity down to the minute. When asked about what surveillance her employer utilizes, Joselyn, a web writer on casual employment for an online engagement company, says:

> … I'm used to being trusted by my manager and when I need to go home to work, to finish a project, they know that I'm going to be working on it and getting it done. But this job…Click Up is an online system where you can create tasks and then you time the tasks. So, they keep track of what tasks are taking what time. So even down to if I need to review messages. Well, I have to go in, create a task that says "review messages", turn on the timer. Then I review my messages or emails or whatever. And then I have to go in and turn off the timer. Then I have to turn on the timer because I'm going to start writing on this article. So I click on that article, click on "write article" and then I write. And I need to go have lunch, I have to turn off the timer. Then I need to turn on the timer. So every single thing is a timer (**P10**).

Joselyn, used to a certain level of autonomy granted to her at previous in-person jobs, notes the contrast between these experiences and her experience working remotely. She continues to describe how this close monitoring affects her pay structure:

> And the timer is so important because when I send my invoice at the end of the month, I say 27 hours is what you owe me. But if they go to the timers and the timers only say 23 hours, they'll come back and say well, what are these other four hours? So, if I forgot to turn on the timer because I was organizing my messages and figuring out what am I going to work on today and it took me 15 minutes. If I didn't turn on a timer for it, I'm not sure they're going to want to pay me. So that's been a really hard adjustment (**P10**).

Joselyn earns an hourly rate at her job and is paid out at the end of the month. She notes that she can "work as many hours as [she] want[s] to or not" (P10) because of her casual employment, but the closeness with which she must track her hours—and the negative consequences if she forgets to do so—severely limits the temporal autonomy in her work and necessarily gives her employer a high level of control.

Her temporal autonomy is impacted doubly through the control exerted over her output at work as well:

> ...you're not allowed to spend more than three hours on an article. And you want a 3,000-to-5,000-word article in three hours, and you want me to put sources...If you want me to edit that now because I haven't had time to edit my own writing and tighten things up and whatever, it's going to be more than three hours...And some of the things they were asking me to write about..."How to garden in Mississippi." Or "What's my growing zone in Mississippi?"...I don't know the first thing about these places, so I had to research...It's like three different articles in one article and it took me time to research them. And I would spend seven hours on an article. Well, no, no, no. It can only be three hours (**P10**).

ClickUp enables Joselyn's employer to closely monitor both how she allocates her time during the workday and the productivity of her writing output. Despite the often unrealistic deadlines imposed on her, Joselyn feels compelled to meet them due to the constant surveillance she experiences from her employer. Among the migrant remote workers interviewed—particularly those in more professional or white-collar roles—Joselyn is subject to the most intensive monitoring. Her experience reflects broader patterns identified in existing research, which suggests that lower-wage and more precariously employed remote workers are disproportionately subjected to heightened employer surveillance (Champagne, 2024).

Other interviewees note a marked increase in communication from their supervisor as a tool of labour control in remote work. Quinton, a remote development and operations employee for an auditing company, emphasizes this point when asked if he's monitored on his computer:

> Probably, yes. I work for an auditing company so I'm pretty sure they are...I also make sure I'm very good at communicating where and when I am. The feedback I've been getting has said that they're happy with how I'm responding to using the system, in contrast to how I've heard of other people that aren't doing so well, and it's just a comparison. I'm not trying to bash anybody else, but it's just how I know I'm doing well is that they're talking about other people that aren't available or responding. You just need to be on the other end of that line and that makes a big difference for remote workplace work (**P17**).

Quinton's account suggests that being perceived as a successful employee in a remote context is closely tied to one's responsiveness and availability, particularly in the absence of physical oversight. He notes that performance is often judged by how promptly one responds when contacted, implying that visibility through communication has become a key form of direct labour control in his remote work environment. His remark about having "heard of other people that aren't doing so well" further indicates a workplace culture in which employees are mindful of each other's perceived performance. This awareness may be interpreted as a form of normative control, with workers internalizing expectations and self-regulating to avoid negative evaluations from their employer. In this way, the pressure to remain continually responsive and the comparative dynamics of Quinton's remote work environment contribute to heightened employer control.

When asked about how his relationship with his supervisor has changed from in-person to remote work, Brandon, a division manager for a federal government program, also emphasizes increased communication:

> I'd say there's more communication because we've had to communicate more in different ways...because of remote [work]... We communicate a lot more. More time answering questions because I can be asked them like any time. People used to call, or they'd send

> me an email, but now it's just like a Messenger or Teams...You don't have to pull everybody into the same room anymore. You just hit a button, and everybody's there. So I'd say in some ways, that's good, but you spend a lot more time communicating than we used to (**P2**).

Brandon observes an increase in the frequency of meetings and a general intensification of communication in his remote work context. He notes that his supervisor and other colleagues now rely more heavily on instant messaging platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Meta Messenger to reach him quickly. While these tools were likely available before the transition to remote work, their increased use signals a broader shift in organizational communication trends. The move away from more traditional forms of contact, such as phone calls and emails, toward platforms with built-in surveillance features, such as read receipts, reflects a shift toward heightened forms of employer control. Read receipts allow senders to see when a message has been read, and they are turned on by default in both Teams and Messenger (Microsoft, n.d.; Meta, n.d.). This places additional pressure on employees to respond promptly, thereby intensifying employer oversight and responsiveness expectations.

Victor, who previously discussed his increased temporal autonomy since remote work eliminates his having to perform productivity, *also* details the increased access to his calendar that managers use to control his schedule in remote work. When asked how working remotely impacts the way he makes decisions at work, he states:

> That's actually an interesting question...we have a whole team of project managers...they're really important for what we do, but they sometimes will get in this habit where they'll drop meetings into your schedule and or assign you things...it used to be someone would come in and talk to me in the office being like, "hey, [Victor], there's this new project that has come up. I just wanna talk. Get a sense of your weight, like bandwidth right now?" Now they just drop a kickoff meeting in my in my inbox which I really don't like...So I would say like that lack of control I don't like, and it's a lot easier for people to abuse your Outlook calendar (**P21**).

For Victor, the temporal autonomy afforded by remote work is constrained when direct control over his schedule is enforced. Although he has greater time flexibility and no longer feels compelled to engage in productivity theater when not actively writing, his schedule remains subject to the whims of managers, who now feel more empowered to add meetings without prior discussion and to "abuse" his calendar in a remote context. This reduces his ability to negotiate his workload before new projects are assigned. Similar to Brandon's experience, Victor's employer may have used a digital calendar before the shift to remote work, but the absence of initial discussions regarding workload represents a shift toward increased employer control in a remote work setting.

Employer control can also manifest in work environments where employee self-advocacy is more difficult. When asked if working remotely changed her ability to challenge external decisions made about her work, Olivia, a data analyst for a real estate appraisal company, explains:

> I think you can be a lot more candid in person. That's going to make it sound like I'm up to no good, but like, you can have a casual conversation with the manager or your boss about, you know, where is my job headed? Where is my salary? Where is, like, what's the plan here? And like people are a lot more cautious on paper or if they think they might be being recorded. So, I think I'm getting a lot less candor or like off-the-cuff. It's a lot more professional remotely (**P15**).

She cites more perceived digital monitoring remotely inhibiting her from speaking candidly at her remote job. Not only is digital surveillance a tool to boost direct employer control, but in Olivia's case, it also operates like a panopticon in that remote employees cannot know if they are being recorded asking questions that they feel may be sensitive, self-censoring through normative control as well. Thus, the fear of recording may inhibit workers from important conversations like salary negotiation or conversations about their satisfaction or work processes, and instead remain passive, granting more compliance to their employer.

While the previous section addressed the temporal autonomy afforded to remote workers by being spatially separate from their workplaces, this section shows the ways that remote worker agency is also limited due to employer control mechanisms, particularly tracking technologies. As in Joselyn's case, this section also shows that spatial and temporal autonomy does not preclude employers from exerting greater control over remote employees to try and extract as much productivity from them as possible.

Resistance in Response to Shifting Spatial Dynamics

Spatial autonomy through remote work and/or moving caused a shift in structural workplace dynamics amongst these workers, including reduced inclusion in team discussions, lack of visibility, fewer opportunities for advancement, or emotional disconnection from workplace culture. This led to different forms of resistance among migrant remote workers. In addition, some employers "resisted" remote work through return-to-work pressures, which employees resisted through individual or collective means.

The predominant form of resistance among interviewees is voluntarily quitting their remote jobs, often in favor of in-person work. One interviewee Yvette was previously working remotely as a business manager for a federal government program when she initially moved to her new community. When asked about how the move to her new community affected her work experience, she shares:

> [The change] was in the first role. And just because I was the only one who was fully remote, right? So sometimes that was difficult just in terms of conversation. Like there is all of a sudden all of these conversations we'd been having virtually for two and a half years, we now had to have at the coffee maker without me there. It was things like that that were more difficult...And so sometimes that was hard being the only one. Or we would have team meetings and I'm the only one on the screen because everyone's sitting in the room and then you can't like fully hear what everyone's saying (**P23**).

In her role as a business manager, Yvette experienced a sense of alienation from her colleagues, particularly as she was the only remote worker. She refers to this job as her "first role," as she ultimately left it for an in-person position in a different field, prompted by the isolation she felt in the remote work environment. This excerpt highlights how a remote worker like Yvette can initially exercise spatial autonomy through her decision to move and work remotely, but this autonomy is not always sustained. Although she negotiated with her employer to work remotely, she could not control the ensuing dynamics, which left her feeling excluded from a workplace to which she had been connected for years (i.e. working exclusively remotely no longer feels like a choice but a mandate after her move). By resigning and transitioning to an in-person role, she resists the employer goal to maintain productivity, as her work dynamics have shifted in distanced remote work.

Another remote worker who left her job for in-person work is Diana, who previously worked as a professional development program manager for an arts organization. She tells the story of leaving her job once she had moved to her new community:

> At the beginning of 2022, I told my boss I was like, look, I am going to start looking for something local, because just sitting alone in my bedroom was not great. I needed to, I wanted to just be out with people again and be more present in the place where I lived. As it was like, you know, I didn't have a lot of reasons to get off the farm...So in September of 2022, I got an [in-person] job...[it's] been really good. Just, you know a different job, something where I'm doing something I'm really enjoying. And I'm feeling more connected with the local community where I am, instead of always being far away from where everybody else is…when I switched jobs it was, I took a pay cut to the tune of about 15 grand…Which I think was probably an indication of how much I was looking for a change (**P27**).

While spatial autonomy allowed Diana to move to her new community, like Yvette, she could not control the rest of her work process. Diana also notes that she took a pay cut because she was so dissatisfied with the isolation her work exacerbated, especially as a migrant remote worker. She is not the only participant to note this, as interviewee Zoe's (P24) husband, who also

retained a remote job upon their initial move, quit his higher-paying white-collar job to work at a coffee shop because he disliked the social isolation of remote work and wanted to become more established in their new community. When spatial autonomy no longer feels satisfactory, these workers quitting voluntarily—especially in favor of often "lower-quality" jobs—can be considered an act of resistance as it works against employer interests (Collective 2022; Dawson 2022; Zhang & Frenkel 2018).

Interviewees also experienced return-to-work pressures from their employers after they moved, infringing upon their spatial autonomy. Rachel, a former administrative assistant for a federal government agency, noted this phenomenon after moving to her new community:

> I was working from home here for a while...With my same job, but they wanted me to be able to go into the office more often because, you know, return-to-office is a thing now. So I just quit. (**P18**)

At the time of the interview, Rachel was enrolled in homecare coursework at a local college, having temporarily stepped away from paid employment. Her voluntary departure in response to return-to-office mandates can be understood as a form of individual resistance, aligning with patterns observed during the Great Resignation in the earlier phases of the pandemic (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). Organizational leaders often justify these mandates by arguing that in-person work builds a stronger company culture, which they believe promotes greater employee engagement, loyalty, and retention—an example of normative control (Chamorro-Premuzic 2025). Additionally, in-person settings facilitate more direct monitoring of employees and reinforce hierarchical power structures—forms of direct control (Chamorro-Premuzic 2025). In this context, Rachel's decision to leave an employer imposing return-to-office requirements can be interpreted as a deliberate act of resistance against forms of labour control.

While most interviewees who resisted employer interests did so through individual action—primarily by quitting their jobs—one participant engaged in a collective form of resistance in response to a return-to-office mandate. At the time of his interview, Victor had recently been informed that his employer was requiring him to return to the physical office, despite his relocation to a new community over a year prior. Reflecting on the situation, Victor explained:

> So I've been going through this [union] grievance process that's now ended with the [employer] agreeing to at least pay my moving costs...I was never naive about the fact that this could come up and that they would want me to come back. It was more the fact that this was decided without and over and above the involvement of my actual manager and director at my division. Actually, the VP wrote a letter on my behalf and it was rejected by HR …No one wanted to have a conversation with me, and it's like I did all this work...I've raised, like now it will be like something like $160 million for them or something insane, you know, like …It's not good faith to arbitrarily enforce this decision without even consulting or talking to the person that this is primarily affecting and explaining it to them. (**P21**)

Despite his frustration with the top-down nature of the decision, Victor ultimately chose to comply and move back to his employer's location. He cited the support he received from colleagues as a key factor in this decision:

> ...the one positive in terms of—I know a lot of people are like, how could you possibly wanna go back and still work at [employer] then? The thing is, within my division, which is not a small division, I discovered that a lot of people went above and beyond and went to bat for me in ways that I was kind of shocked by. (**P21**)

Victor's case illustrates how spatial autonomy can be significantly constrained by employer mandates. His account also demonstrates that high productivity does not necessarily shield remote workers from managerial authority or unilateral decision-making. In response, Victor pursued a union grievance, received support from the vice president of his organization, and received unexpected advocacy within his team. Although he was unable to retain his

preferred living situation, collective resistance mitigated some of the effects of employer control—most notably through the reimbursement of his relocation costs.

This resolution has mixed implications for resistance. While the collective resistance challenged the extent of employer authority, it also reinforced Victor's ties to the organization, contributing to his decision to remain in his job. The same work relationships that enabled resistance also functioned to preserve organizational control, though these relationships may help to facilitate further collective resistance in the future.

The insights from migrant remote workers discussed in this section illustrate that their spatial experience at work is dynamic. While their initial relocation reflects an exercise of spatial autonomy, their satisfaction with this arrangement can be diminished through post-move developments such as workplace isolation and employer-imposed return-to-office mandates. These changes also prompt resistance to evolving forms of managerial control via voluntary quitting and collective action.

Normative Labour Control: "Consenting to their Demise"

While employers use a variety of control practices to optimize productivity in their workforce, normative control is perhaps the most pervasive form, as it does not require direct surveillance; instead, workers police their own actions in the workplace. The fourth finding from my research is that migrant remote workers fall prey to this dynamic, describing how working remotely increased their productivity, while also feeling "in control" of their work via job autonomy. This points out a potential fallacy in control, as feeling in control may mask deeper forms of managerial influence and internalized pressure. As Bromfield (2022) notes, workers may consent to their own demise in this process.

Interviewee Gregory notes that he felt coerced into putting more work on his plate at his remote job:

> It was like you still have to meet [expectations] – and it's a gigantic international agency that has teams all over the world. And so they're pitching in all these different markets and there's always some kind of team in the Netherlands saying you know about this, can you help us with this pitch? And it's completely uncoordinated. Nobody's really looking out for your time other than you. You're the only person who can say no and you always feel like you need to say yes (**P7**).

Gregory describes feeling like he must say yes to projects to meet team expectations. While the option to say no may technically exist for workers at Gregory's former company, the pressures of the job and its organizational culture limit job autonomy through normative control. A relevant contextual detail from Gregory's interview is that he was laid off from his remote position due to organizational cost-cutting measures, leading him to pursue independent contract work. His experience shows that even highly productive remote workers who conform to employer expectations remain susceptible to job insecurity, highlighting a broader absence of substantive worker control within the workplace.

Other migrant remote workers note their increased productivity as a benefit. Victor describes how he views the benefits of his remote work:

> I'm so much more productive since I've been at home...You know one of the huge advantages of working remotely, not just remotely, but also being an hour ahead, is that I can get up at 8 o'clock. I can do the most important [work done] because really, I write better first thing in the morning... so I can get huge projects done. You know, for the two hours before my job technically begins at 10 o'clock. Right?...You're just way more in control of how you get your work done, and because of that, you know....Which sounds counterintuitive because "oh, you're just screwing around at home". But actually when I work, I'm so focused. I'm actually super efficient and so I can work really a lot more quickly (**P21**).

Victor not only emphasizes his heightened productivity while working from home but also illustrates how his relocation to a different time zone contributes to this outcome. His experience reflects both normative control through increased productivity and the illusion of autonomy he

perceives in his role. As outlined in earlier sections, spatial autonomy is often linked to greater temporal autonomy among remote workers. This is evident in Victor's case, as his move to a new place enables him to begin work earlier and align tasks with his most productive hours. While these conditions suggest enhanced spatial and temporal autonomy, the primary beneficiary of this arrangement is ultimately the employer, who gains from Victor's optimized performance.

Victor also points out a perspective on remote workers, namely that they are "just screwing around at home." This demonstrates normative control as well; if this is the impression of remote workers within Victor's workplace, then remote workers may feel pressure to be more productive to justify their existence to the employer and retain their spatial autonomy.

Lance, a remote worker employed as a customer service and project support agent for a renewable energy company, describes another instance of heightened employer control masked by impressions of job autonomy when asked how working remotely affects his ability to control his work:

> Yeah, I would say more control in essentially every aspect. Yeah, more control in terms of, I don't feel micromanaged. This company is very good about it. We do have key performance indicators, and it's on a board that we could all see so we see how each other is performing. And I guess that keeps you, I guess, honest in case there's people that take advantage of a system. … And when I first joined the job, I thought, that's, maybe revealing or feels a bit like intimate for everyone to be able to see, because you can see everyone else's...So yeah, I mean, after that initial apprehension, I haven't really minded it. I don't know if other people on my team feel differently, but sometimes it keeps me on track. I see that my numbers are down for the day, and I'm like, time to buckle down a bit here and just put the nose to the grindstone...It seems to work well with my personality, so that's a bonus for me (**P12**).

This account shows the relationship between perceived worker control and labour control; Lance notes that he has more control "in essentially every aspect" and does not feel micromanaged, yet states immediately afterward that he and his coworkers are visibly tracked on their productivity and can see each other's KPI performance. He expresses his appreciation of this productivity

control, framing it as an advantage and something that works well with his personality. While this is undoubtedly direct control through employer surveillance, normative control forces also affect his remote workplace. He compares himself to his other coworkers to ensure he is on track and puts his "nose to the grindstone" if he is not. Moreover, he outrightly praises the company for its work style, accentuating the normative control the employer has over his productivity and work commitment.

Eva also describes normative control masked by job autonomy. When asked about the advantages of her remote work, she says:

> I feel more productive, definitely, because I can kind of do what I need to do without being interrupted for whatever reason, because I think working in an office, there's many things that can interrupt you....co-workers, just things going on, you know… whatever it is. But I feel like when I'm at home I'm more productive…it's a lot quieter up here, so I feel like I'm more at peace and mentally healthier, so I actually have better relationship with my clients...I'm not so rushed, I'm not trying to rush them off the phone. I guess I'm sensitive to maybe like a bit of like the city noise. I've noticed now. It's just because when I'm working, I like to be concentrated and be my space. Even in the city, sometimes when I'm at my mom's or I'm trying to work at a Starbucks, like it's impossible. It's just too noisy, there's too much going on kind of thing...my clients, I think love it. I'm more attentive to them (**P5**).

Eva notes that she is more productive working at home, and like Lance and Victor, portrays it in an overtly positive light. She notes not only how her clients seem to appreciate the additional time that she gives them working from her new community, but also how the move to the new community itself contributes to the increased attention she gives to her clients. She describes how she feels "more at peace and mentally happier" in her new location despite working more, reflecting how spatial autonomy does not preclude hyper-productivity. She goes on to say:

> And also, me personally, I find it more difficult to find work-life balance because no one is kicking me out of the office, right? No one is shutting the lights down...So, you know, I guess, like, more working lunches. (**P5**).

While Eva has exercised her spatial autonomy through moving and has noted a level of temporal autonomy that allows her to work self-determined hours (especially as a consultant), this autonomy is used to overwork to the benefit of her employers. This is location-specific as well, as she also reports in her interview that she gets lonely in remote work and that she feels more socially isolated in her new community ("I'm very social so...disadvantages [of remote work], it gets a little bit lonely", P5; "I don't have friends here", P5). For Eva, much of the time that was previously spent on personal activities and socializing has now shifted to additional work, to the benefit of her employers.

When describing how working remotely has affected her ability to control different aspects of her work, interviewee Olivia points out the tradeoff between autonomy and control that many migrant remote workers experience:

> It means if I forgot something, I can turn my computer on and deal with it. The line of work I'm doing now because it's sort of [like a] contractor, too, like everybody works different hours. So, I get calls at odd hours. That's a little annoying, but that's more about my employer, I think. When we were first living in apartments and I had to look at my computer after hours, that was kind of annoying because it was still in my living room. But now that I have the space, it's really good (**P15**).

When Olivia refers to "the space," she means the improved living conditions (specifically, the ability to purchase a house with a backyard) that her move enabled. This gain via spatial autonomy makes her more willing to work outside regular hours, even as she loses some temporal autonomy under employer pressures to be productive. She is more prone to normative control after migrating to her new location, as she went from perceiving after-hours work as "annoying" to "really good" in her new house; Olivia seems satisfied trading employer gains in availability and productivity for the benefits of spatial autonomy.

Many migrant remote workers internalize productivity norms after relocating, benefiting their employers. While they express gratitude for increased autonomy and the ability to move, this perceived control ultimately advances the employer-driven goal of increased output.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Data results from these interviews draw attention to the relationship between autonomy and control among migrant remote workers. While many findings bolster existing literature, new perspectives can also be gleaned from the data, particularly concerning spatial elements of how migrant remote workers relate to their work life.

By virtue of their move to rural communities, participants are exercising high levels of spatial autonomy, and most interviewees make explicit reference to increased levels of temporal autonomy. The correlation of spatial autonomy to temporal autonomy is also consistent with existing research by (Jarrahi et al 2021; Dunn et al 2023; Brooks et al 2022; Boccoli et al). While interviewees report the control over their work schedules and location increasing, they also note increased surveillance through workplace technology and increased productivity—that is, increased neo-normative control in their remote jobs since they have been able to exercise their individual will be moving. The presence of digital surveillance and increased productivity are also consistent with findings in the existing literature (Suarez 2022; Aloisi & de Stefano 2022; Choudhury et al 2021; Hackney 2022). These findings overall suggest that with increased autonomy, migrant remote workers (knowingly or unknowingly) often consent to greater levels of employer control.

The spatial dynamics in the findings, however, present a slightly new perspective on these data trends. Interviewees express positive feelings about their autonomy and a preference for remote work. Interviewees also express that their productivity is directly linked to their spatial move, be it through living in a different time zone (P12), working in a quieter environment out of the city (P5), or a willingness to work outside of normal hours because of the house they were able to buy through their move (P15). While some aspects of these findings can

be asserted for remote workers generally, migrant remote workers are linked to the specific spatial benefits of the place to which they moved (new house, more space, more peaceful, etc.).

While not explicit, the implications of these findings are that migrant remote workers express a greater willingness to relinquish to overt and/or normative employer control than remote workers living close to their place of work because they have a greater stake in maintaining their autonomy than locally based remote workers; these workers have invested in buying houses, homesteading on their property, raising families, and more in their new communities. Consequently, they may feel under added pressure to perform well as a worker (i.e. being extra productive and tolerating surveillance) to retain the job that allowed them to live there. Alternately, some interviewees express a sense of gratitude to their employer for the level of autonomy that allowed them to move, and it is possible they feel they must "repay" them through increased productivity.

This correlation between autonomy and employer control also exists among those migrant remote workers who left their jobs in favor of in-person work. As their dissatisfaction grows in relation to the isolation of their remote job, they are not necessarily exercising spatial *autonomy* any longer; their homebound work location is no longer a choice, but something they feel forced into (Reisinger & Fetterer 2021). This is consistent with Hackney's study revealing that when work-from-home becomes mandatory, the worker has flexibility but not autonomy over their work location, so the impacts are less positive (Hackney et al. 2022). In losing their sense of spatial autonomy, these workers are more willing to part with their remote jobs.

This phenomenon also presents a distinct perspective to the research into remote worker resistance. Among white-collar, non-unionized remote workers, one of the main forms of resistance present in existing literature is the Great Resignation (Formica & Sfodera 2022).

Those who left their jobs during this movement did so because of return-to-work policies and often switched to roles that allowed them to maintain working remotely (Formica & Sfodera 2022). As alluded to in the data analysis, these migrant remote workers quitting voluntarily, particularly in favor of jobs that pay less (P24; P27), can be construed as an act of resistance since it works against employer interests (Collective 2022; Dawson 2022). These interviewees also noted their desires to integrate into their local community by shifting to in-person work, further highlighting this as a distinct phenomenon for migrant remote workers (P24; P27). While this finding was less consistent than those who enjoyed their spatial autonomy, this is a finding salient to migrant remote workers specifically, as the feelings of loneliness that spurred their perceived lack of spatial autonomy related directly to their move (e.g. knowing no one in your community, exacerbated isolation by living rurally).

It is worth noting that some workers utilized forms of individual resistance designed for them to work less. Talia (P20) and Matthew (P13) refer to moving their mouses to appear active at work while engaged in personal activities. They are not alone in using this tactic—many remote workers have adopted the use of "mouse jigglers" designed to simulate mouse movement and keep a computer active without any user input (Sum et al 2024). For them, spatial autonomy eliminating constraints of the office that allow bosses and other coworkers to police one's work time in person, Talia and other remote workers can reclaim more of their personal time and achieve more autonomy through subverting implemented forms of direct control. They are effectively "tricking" the tools to reclaim autonomy over their time, which may be interpreted as a form of quiet quitting—a deliberate disengagement from the normative expectations of the job without formally resigning (Harter 2022).

For all these participants, autonomy—and more broadly, worker wellbeing—can be conceived as a tool of control over migrant remote workers. Much modern managerial literature emphasizes encouraging well-being among workers, as it makes them more likely to deliver optimal performance in the workplace (Adams 2019). While migrant remote workers report greater well-being through increased spatial and temporal autonomy, it does not preclude employers from exerting greater control over them to extract as much productivity from them as possible.

In sum, working remotely tends to increase worker autonomy – particularly geographical flexibility for the participants of this study. But it has mixed effects over worker control, and any gains in worker control through resistance are at a highly individualized level. While remote employers do use increased means of casual surveillance (e.g. more meetings, putting items on your calendar without asking, etc.) through technology, the greater control mechanism used effectively by employers is normative control – self-discipline in worker productivity, often connected to their perceived feelings of spatial or temporal agency after moving.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The data presented in this paper illustrate that while the popularization of remote work is a transformative shift in the modern labour landscape, it is not a solution for the challenges workers face. Despite its flexibility, remote work does not inherently improve job security, reduce precarity, or guarantee better working conditions. Instead, it often redistributes existing labour concerns, masking issues like overwork, surveillance, and isolation under the guise of convenience and autonomy. Migrant remote workers accept this trade-off, but it is a "consent to their own demise" in pursuit of an otherwise more desirable life (buying a house, getting closer to nature, etc.) (Bromfield 2022).

While the findings in this study are valuable, I will describe some limitations to consider in the context of this paper. Firstly, the use of qualitative research, especially as compared to quantitative research, a limitation almost inherent to the practice is a lack of sample generalizability (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2010). The samples are most often small and non-representative, making this a limitation of qualitative research more generally—this is true for my study as well. Qualitative content analysis is centered around the interpretation of meaning, making it a characteristically more subjective methodology and less generalizable than quantitative analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2010).

While I yielded valuable results from the data collected in this thesis, the ongoing development of my ideas in the process of this project was also a limitation, as the shifting of my research question and scope altered the relevancy of the already collected interview data. When my involvement with the SSHRC project began, I had conceptualized a somewhat different version of my project. The initial iteration of my thesis project focused on how distanced remote work affected workers' connection with their co-workers, particularly concerning how this affected

remote workers' capacity to organize and resist collectively. This direction is reflected in my initial list of questions (e.g. "How does working remotely affect work culture?", "How has working remotely affected your ability to connect with colleagues?"). However, after fine-tuning my interests and discussing research gaps with my supervisor and SSHRC project lead, Dr. Suzanne Mills, I decided to pivot to focus more specifically on control and resistance dynamics for migrant remote workers.

By the time these changes were established, the research had already been collected. Because of this, the useable and relevant data for my project was more limited than I had hoped. This limitation was also compounded by the fact that other members of the research team were integrating my questions into their interview schedules. I had not yet shared clear information about the goals of my thesis project with research team members, as it was still in development during the period in which we were conducting interviews. Due to their only surface-level understanding of my project from what we had discussed, data from these interviews was limited as well. With hindsight, I would have altered my questions on the interview schedule to focus more specifically on the dynamics of control and resistance, talked more thoroughly with co-researchers about the information I hoped to glean from participants, and changed my initial codes to align more with the labour control and resistance literature.

Given more time and hindsight, I would also have liked to explore neo-normative control among migrant remote workers to a greater extent. This topic holds interesting potential, as these workers often express individuality by relocating—an act of self-actualization beyond the workplace. I'm curious how much this expression is supported by remote employers, even as they guide employee behavior toward productivity and alignment with organizational goals. This

dynamic would be a compelling area for future research, as it highlights the paradox of increased workplace liberalization coexisting with forms of control.

Another valuable direction for future research is the study of collective organizing among white-collar remote workers. While digital workers are beginning to unionize, these efforts remain largely undocumented in academic literature. Most existing studies on collective action focus on already-unionized workers negotiating to stay remote or on gig workers in platform-based roles.

However, recent economic trends suggest a shift. In 2023, 6.1 million fewer Americans quit their jobs compared to 2022 (a 12% drop), marking a clear end to the patterns we have previously seen in the Great Resignation (Kelly 2024). As white-collar jobs become more insecure due to layoffs and the threat of automation, it's increasingly important to understand how this segment of the workforce—often seen as less likely to organize—may begin to come together in new ways.

As research on the future of work continues to evolve, it is also crucial to assess job quality through a critical lens that prioritizes worker well-being beyond surface-level benefits. Policymakers, organizations, and researchers must interrogate whether remote work is genuinely improving employment conditions or merely shifting the burden of workplace stress onto individuals in new and less visible ways. While remote work touts notable productivity gains accrued to businesses, it is not reflected in increased compensation to workers (Pabilonia & Redmond 2024). Without intentional structural reforms—such as stronger labour protections, equitable pay, and a redefinition of productivity that centers on worker health—remote work may reinforce rather than alleviate existing inequalities (Miall 2021).

The future of work must therefore be shaped with a clear commitment to holistic job quality, rather than an overreliance on technological convenience. As discussions around remote work persist, the focus should shift toward ensuring that it is a sustainable and equitable option rather than an illusion of worker empowerment.

Appendix A – Interview Questions

1. **What do you perceive as the advantages and challenges of working remotely? [If shifted from at workplace to remote – ask to compare with previous for each question]**

2. How does working remotely affect work culture?

3. How does working remotely affected your ability to control different aspects of your work?
    a. Has the move to your new community affected this?
        i. When you do your work/ hours of work
        ii. Location of work
        iii. Day to day activities

4. How has working remotely affected your ability to connect with colleagues?
    a. Has the move to your new community affected this?

5. How has working remotely affected your ability to challenge decisions made about your work?
    a. Has the move to your new community affected this?

6. **If unionized**: has working remotely affected your involvement with your union?
    a. Has the move to your new community affected this?

7. Does your employer use any forms of surveillance?

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