Review Essay / Essai critique

The feminist economic geographies of working from home and “digital by default” in Canada before, during, and after COVID-19

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Key Messages

• The COVID-19 pandemic stands to alter work-life conditions for households in ways that transform the role and meaning of both home and work.

• Feminist economic geography helps us to understand shifts to working from home in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

• An interrogation of “telework capacity” and “digital by default” reveals the various assumptions built into these discourses.

This paper builds on insights in feminist economic geography to critically review the literature on work in the home and provide a starting point for examining COVID-19 pandemic-imposed work from home measures for tertiary and quaternary sector firms and organizations. It critically reviews literature on the pandemic, working from home, and work in general, to examine lockdown-related workplace disruptions in relation to the various forms of work that took place in the home prior to the pandemic. It argues that feminist economic geography provides a starting point for examinations of working from home during and after COVID-19. This situates writing on social reproduction, and informal and unpaid work in the home, within the purview of our understanding of pandemic response. Following this review, the paper demonstrates this argument by interrogating Canada’s “telework capacity” discourse and the decisions by white-collar offices regarding the continuation and abatement of “digital by default” policies. The pandemic will radically shift our understanding of the meanings of both home and work, and this paper, through a critical review of key literature, suggests that feminist economic geography provides one starting point for theorizing the implications of that shift in the Canadian context.

Keywords: COVID-19, feminist economic geography, social reproduction, work, working from home
that the office died and descriptions of 2020 as “the year the office died” (Andrew-Gee 2020; Nardi 2020). The key event propagating this concern for the office was the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced workplace closures and emergency work from home measures for whomever possible, mostly those employed in the tertiary and quaternary sectors. As unemployment reached 14% in June 2020, Statistics Canada estimated Canada’s “telework capacity”—the proportion of Canada’s workforce with the capacity to work from home—at 40% of total workers (Deng et al. 2020). Sectors most amenable to working from home (with a telework capacity at over 50%) included finance, insurance, education, administration, technical and scientific services, and wholesale trade. Yet, perhaps more precipitous for these newspapers’ anxieties than estimates of the nation’s capacity to work from home—meaning dramatic and lasting changes for Canada’s workforce—was the May 21 announcement from Shopify CEO Tobi Lütke (2020) that following the pandemic, employees would not return to the office and that the firm would henceforth be “digital by default.”

Lütke’s announcement came alongside reports that the e-commerce firm is now the most valuable firm in Canada, edging out RBC with an estimated valuation of $120 billion, notwithstanding the fact that venture-backed digital media firm valuations are often unreliable and overinflated (Gornall and Strebulev 2020). Yet the announcement is surprising given that, like many other digital media firms, Shopify’s corporate identity and employee culture—a central marketing tool used to attract both employees and investors—is crafted around the promise of a luxurious and decadent, yet casual, office space (Pratt 2002). Shopify was almost at the end of an expansion and refurbishment of its Waterloo office, representing a significant financial investment, and making Lütke’s decision a reversal of recent trends. It appears contrary also to older trends in the digital media sector, such as Yahoo! and HP’s respective decisions to roll back telework allowances in 2013 (Lohman 2015). Yet, Shopify joined other high-profile US-based digital media firms including Facebook, Twitter, and Square who have all made statements suggesting—to various degrees—that a full-scale return to the office is unlikely.

Shopify’s digital by default messaging has to some extent been replicated in other sectors as well. In the public sector, Transport Canada has announced similar plans for its 6,000 workers (Nardi 2020). US-based surveys suggest that 55% of executives expect to offer working from home at least one day a week for employees following the pandemic (PwC 2020) and that 74% of CFOs expect

Introduction

In May 2020, national Canadian newspapers expressed anxiety over the closures of white-collar workspaces, with hyperbolic declarations that “the office is over” and descriptions of 2020 as “the year the office died” (Andrew-Gee 2020; Nardi 2020). The key event propagating this concern for the office was the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced workplace closures and emergency work from home measures for whomever possible, mostly those employed in the tertiary and quaternary sectors. As unemployment reached 14% in June 2020, Statistics Canada estimated Canada’s “telework capacity”—the proportion of Canada’s workforce with the capacity to work from home—at 40% of total workers (Deng et al. 2020). Sectors most amenable to working from home (with a telework capacity at over 50%) included finance, insurance, education, administration, technical and scientific services, and wholesale trade. Yet, perhaps more precipitous for these newspapers’ anxieties than estimates of the nation’s capacity to work from home—meaning dramatic and lasting changes for Canada’s workforce—was the May 21 announcement from Shopify CEO Tobi Lütke (2020) that following the pandemic, employees would not return to the office and that the firm would henceforth be “digital by default.”

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work from home to be permanent for some employees (Gartner 2020). Yet, Litke’s digital by default announcement should not be taken as necessarily indicative of a generalizable trend for the tertiary and quaternary sectors in Canada. Other notable Canadian digital media firms (e.g., OpenText) have not followed suit. Google’s Kitchener office is instigating plans for a slow and partial return to the office. Firms whose workers are now working from home during the lockdown are thus thinking carefully about what a return to the office looks like.

The pandemic-induced increase in working from home stands to radically transform, both rhetorically and materially, the respective meanings of work and home, their roles in everyday life, and their roles in the capitalist economic structures to which we remain subject. While geographers have paid minimal attention to telework (Reuschke and Felstead 2020), in this review paper, I argue that feminist economic geography provides an important starting point for examinations of work in the tertiary and quaternary sectors in Canada. While geographers have paid minimal attention to telework (Reuschke and Felstead 2020), in this review paper, I argue that feminist economic geography provides an important starting point for examinations of work in the home before, during, and after COVID-19. Feminist economic geography is well-placed to examine this shift because of its critical engagement with social reproduction and other forms of work in the home (Strauss and Meehan 2015), its complex and expansive understandings of both work and home (Reid-Musson et al. 2020), and its sophisticated problematization of classifications of both sectoral activity and economic transition (Gibson-Graham 2008; McDowell 2015). In a more general sense, feminist economic geography takes seriously questions of social difference—expressed in terms of race, class, and sexuality, as well as in terms of gender—by interrogating embodied and lived experience (McDowell 1997), structural inequality and discrimination (Loomis 2018), and the reproduction of the hegemonic power relationships of patriarchal racial capitalism (Mullings 2019).

To make this argument I build first on a critical review of literature on work in the home in its various forms prior to the pandemic—as social reproduction and as informal paid and unpaid work, as well as employee-based and self-employed formal work—to contextualize pandemic-induced forms of working in the home that overlap in complex ways with these various kinds of work that were already taking place there. Feminist perspectives are important, as the home is often erroneously construed as a sphere of non-work or leisure, which devalues the various forms of work that take place there and undertheorizes the extent to which production and social reproduction already overlap and merge in the home (Winders and Smith 2019). Second, I discuss how feminist economic geography, alongside cognate approaches, can help us to understand pandemic-induced forms of working from home (Bahn et al. 2020; Reuschke and Felstead 2020). I interrogate digital by default and telework capacity—central discourses in Canada on working from home during the pandemic—using the insights from feminist economic geography developed in the first section to explore key omissions and omissions embedded in these narratives. I show how feminist economic geography draws attention to the power relations embedded in the assumptions behind these narratives, which fail to consider social difference in the labour market and as a result are likely to exacerbate existing forms of inequality.

While insights from research on the digital media sector (and feminist critiques therein) are broadly helpful here, discourses such as telework capacity and digital by default apply beyond the digital media sector more generally to any tertiary and quaternary sector firms whose workers have the capacity to work from home (in sectors noted above, see Deng et al. 2020). While emphasizing that these discourses exceed those sectors defined as “digital economies” or as “digital work,” I focus on the digital media sector to some extent since it is often viewed—alongside the so-called creative class and related discourses (Peck 2005; Mould 2018)—as a leading edge of economic development that is therefore worthy of policy imitation (Saxenian 1994). Shopify embracing a digital by default policy, for example, could be a bellwether for other firms and sectors with a high telework capacity.

The novelty in this approach is in applying analyses long-endemic to feminist economic geography to discourses about work that, for some, are emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic. The central contribution of this paper is in showing, through this critical review and analysis of key discourses, how feminist economic geography is essential to theorizing pandemic-induced changes in working formations, given the valuable inroads it has already made as noted above, and
taking as an example the dramatic increase in work from home in certain sectors, given new pandemic-enforced work from home measures. In addition to the novelty (and necessity) of applying critiques developed in feminist economic geography to working discourses emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is also a set of risks associated with ignoring feminist criticism to which, in certain cases, mainstream economic geography still remains subject (Cockayne et al. 2018; Rosenman et al. 2020). These risks include devaluing particular kinds of work (e.g., in particular unpaid, informal, and socially reproductive work), under theorizing the complexity of the home as it overlaps and merges with work in new ways, and failing to consider social difference in the reproduction of structural inequality. While many commentators have argued that pandemic-imposed work from home means that it is no longer possible to ignore social reproduction (Bahn et al. 2020), feminist criticism allows us to view this claim with scepticism, given the historical precedents of undermining the contributions of these workers, and of ignoring feminist critique itself (McDowell 2016).

Work in the home before the pandemic

In this section I discuss research on the organization of paid and unpaid work that took place in the home prior to the pandemic, including social reproduction, informal paid and unpaid work, self-employment, and employee-based work. The primary focus in this section is on the latter two categories since the topic of the paper is tertiary and quaternary sector firms responding to work from home measures, yet the first two categories—social reproduction in particular—must be accounted for in order to understand how different kinds of work overlap in the home in new ways and how the respective meanings of work and home might change in light of the pandemic. Laying this groundwork by exploring precisely what different kinds of work took place in the home prior to the pandemic is important so as to better understand the impact of enforced work from home measures on particular sectors and workers. I use an expansive definition of work outlined by feminist economic geographers and others who view work as a generalizable activity involved in creating a good or service for oneself or for others (England and Lawson 2005; Komlosy 2018). This is a critique of definitions that centre production for the market as the only real form of work (i.e., in which only work that produces value on the market in the Marxist sense is allowed to count as work), thereby ignoring various forms of unpaid and socially reproductive work, which remains disproportionately undertaken by women (Moyser and Burlock 2018) and upon which production depends (Weeks 2011; Federici 2012).

This feminist definition of work displaces the masculinist bias toward analyses of only particular kinds of work (e.g., work as “productive,” employment-based, and for the market) in much economic writing, and situates unpaid work, informal work, and social reproduction at the heart of critical conversations about work in late-capitalist society. In the context of this paper this frame pushes us to think carefully about how certain kinds of paid work that encroach newly upon home spaces due to pandemic-induced work from home measures remain dependent upon forms of unpaid work such as social reproduction with which they now overlap in new ways. As Reuschke (2019, 1327) notes, “the home as a site of paid work has received little attention in geographical research.” This connotes the marginality of understandings of the home as a site of work in general in geography today, likely as a result of the above-mentioned biases, though much writing in feminist economic geography and beyond is focused on the home as a site of work in the form of unpaid social reproduction (Winders and Smith 2019). As the pandemic radically alters our paid and unpaid workplace geographies, there is a particular need—both in general and for those affected by work from home measures—for research that considers the overlapping and merging of different kinds of work in home spaces.

Social reproduction is the work required to reproduce everyday life; it is the basic and necessary work that allows us to continue living both at the individual or familial level and—in terms of sexual reproduction and raising children—at the inter-generational level. From a feminist political economist point of view, social reproduction—and the sexual and gendered norms that accompany it—is the work required to reproduce the worker; it is a necessary condition enabling capitalist production, providing a subsidy for capital by exporting the cost of reproducing its workforce to the home.
(Mezzandri 2020). Social reproduction has historically been unpaid, socially undervalued, and undertaken by women. Much of this work today remains assumed-women's work and it is rhetorically and structurally devalued whether women are responsible for it or not (Strauss and Meehan 2015). When social reproduction is a form of paid domestic work—undertaken, for example, by housekeepers—it has often been performed by poor white women and women of colour (Collins 2000; Hopkins 2015). In Canada today, paid social reproduction is often undertaken by racialized migrant women employed through federal migrant worker programs (Sharma 2006; Pratt 2012).

Geographers note that social reproduction (and the space of the home) overlaps and is merged with production (Winders and Smith 2019). Though it is common for theorists to separate production and social reproduction spatially and conceptually, it is increasingly clear that to do so is intellectually untenable. To theorize production without considering regimes of social reproduction ignores an essential condition of the former: without reproducing workers' collective capacities to labour, production would not be able to take place. Production and social reproduction are intertwined in the sense that: (1) production could not proceed without historically and geographically specific regimes of social reproduction; (2) homes are also sites of paid social reproduction; (3) social reproduction takes place outside the home (in the forms of food services and custodial work); and (4) homes have always also been sites of production themselves. Theorizing production and social reproduction as conceptually and spatially merged has the advantage of examining the (re)production of particular working bodies (e.g., the "efficient worker" and "subservient housewife") as a key achievement of capitalism in excess of the accumulation of capital itself (Federici 2004). This allows us to situate the differentially classed, gendered, racialized, and sexual production of subjects—as diligent workers who work for love not money and identify with and feel indebted to their employer—as central (and not incidental) to capitalism.

While the overlapping and merging of production with social reproduction is often associated with a neoliberal shift, or a technologically-mediated one, in reality this overlapping of paid and unpaid work and of production and social reproduction in the home is nothing new. Informal and formal piece-workers or "industrial" home-based manufacturing workers have long used the home as a site of production. These workers are often racialized home workers most commonly undertaking sartorial work for low pay and without benefits or other forms of security (Moos and Skarburskis 2007). Where contracts do exist, employers are often in violation of provincial legislation by denying underpaid workers overtime and vacation pay (Ng 1999). It is difficult to estimate how many people in Canada are working informally in their homes, though of the 6% of adult Canadians who indicated that they work from home (based on data from the 2006 Census), 17% are unemployed or not in the labour force, possibly indicating the continuing prevalence of informal forms of paid home work (Moos and Skarburskis 2007). Industrial home workers may be economically and socially dependent on others, and their work is likely to overlap in various ways with other forms of paid or unpaid social reproduction work.

Informal work in the home also takes place in the form of "unpaid market labour"—distinct from both unpaid social reproduction and formal participation in the labour market—such as work undertaken off the books by professional spouses of business-owners, executives, and politicians (Philippis 2008). Unpaid market labour is undertaken by privileged and upper-class workers that constitute a group distinct from industrial home workers, though the work of each group may be variously informal. Thus, in all these observations, attention to class is important so as not to make false equivalences between radically different kinds of work, but also to acknowledge that the home is the site of variously overlapping forms of dependency, precarity, and classed dynamics (England and Lawson 2005). Homes can be the site of different class dynamics in formalized, highly paid employment-based work; informal kinds of highly-skilled yet unpaid work; paid but undervalued work of live-in domestic servants; paid skilled visitational work of nurses providing long-term care; unpaid housework, childcare, and other kinds of care work; and the occasional work of children performing housekeeping tasks in exchange for pocket-money. Such overlapping forms of work reveal at once the arbitrariness and the entrenchment of societal valuation of work—both rhetorically and monetarily—and how those valuations

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are inflected with various forms of social difference.

Though social reproduction is the most structurally important form of work in the home (in the sense that our individual and societal survival depends upon it), paid self-employed and employee-based telework also encroaches on home spaces, expanding beyond both the office and the home to become increasingly multi-locational (Burchell et al. 2020). In terms of formalized paid work in the home, research differentiates between self-employed people and employees who work in their homes for some or all of their work week. In Canada, the proportion of self-employed people and employees working from home had been gradually increasing before the pandemic. Employees who usually conduct any of their weekly working hours from home increased from 11% of all employees (around 1.7 million) in 2008 to around 13% in 2018 (Deng et al. 2020). In 2018, 15% of total employment (around 2.9 million people) were self-employed, although only about half of these workers work from home, a rise from 12% in 1976 (Yssaad and Ferrao 2019). Though these gradual increases are often attributed to the development of internet technologies, Huws (1991) notes that popular anxieties around “electronic homework” and the presumed dwindling relevance of the physical office emerged as early as the 1950s, long before the availability of home internet. Here home work—facilitated by phone and fax—was presented as an alternative to energy-intensive commutes and inhumane corporate culture (Baruch 2001). As cheaper personal computers and home internet became more prevalent in the 1970s, formal paid work encroached further on home spaces.

Prior to the pandemic, self-employed and employee-based home work has been mostly the domain of privileged workers in high-status, well-paid positions (Mirchandani 1999). Working from home was more likely to be an option in the public sector and in larger and unionized organizations where work output and quality are more self-directed (Felstead et al. 2002a). For employees, the ability to work from home often connotes both a particular class position and a position of relative power or status, or an earned privilege within their firm (Felstead et al. 2002b). While for most employees who work from home it is, therefore, an option they specifically request, involuntary working from home, as directed by employers to save costs on office rental, has also increased (Johnson et al. 2007; Lapierre et al. 2016). For self-employed workers, the question of whether working from home is voluntary is more complex given the demands of an increasingly competitive and the enforced flexibility of labour markets.

Self-employed and employment-based home work are gendered. In the United Kingdom, the majority of both employees and self-employed workers working from home are women and more women than men cite “work-family balance” and “flexible hours” as key reasons for self-employment (Reuschke 2019). Working from home is often represented as an empowering choice for women; Ekinsmyth (2013) notes how discourses of “intensive mothership” continue to affect women’s decisions to start home-based businesses. Gregg (2008) analyzes how this has led to a narrowing of aspirations and opportunities for women encouraged to “have it all” and who are therefore trapped in cycles of excessive work between (self-)employment and childcare. This is especially the case when any activity that takes place in the home is (mis)construed as leisure (Mirchandani 1998), erasing the predominantly women’s work that takes place there. In the post-feminist pro-capitalist mindset, the options available to women do not include choosing not to work, which points to the rhetorical intransigence of work in allegedly progressive political imaginaries and the adaptability of capitalism to include narrowly feminist visions in its rhetoric when doing so facilitates the extraction of surplus value (Weeks 2011).

The rising prevalence of working from home challenges and reifies the notion of work and home as separate spheres that accompanied the 19th century entrenchment of bourgeois, white, heterosexual gendered and sexual norms (D’Emilio and Freedman 1983). Mirchandani (1999) examines how home workers (employees and self-employed people working from home) often reinforce a distinction between work and “nonwork”—that is, unpaid social reproduction in the home—in a variety of ways. Some home workers perform going to work rituals, demark a physical home office, and refuse domestic work while on the clock at home. Work in the home is performed in part through the reproduction and inscription of a difference between the two activities, which entails a gendered
devaluation of domestic tasks. Rather than a strict separation between production and social reproduction, this reinforces the dependence of paid work upon unpaid work in the home, in the sense that part of the work of working from home is maintaining and reinforcing barriers between work and nonwork. Mirchandani (1999) notes that this dichotomy masks the interdependence of work and nonwork while obscuring the unpaid work upon which capitalism depends.

While prior to the pandemic those with children are more likely to work at home than those without (Reuschke 2019), broader motivations for working from home vary from minimizing or eliminating commuting time, escaping corporatized environments, evading social control, finding a more pleasant working environment, and balancing work and leisure or work and family commitments. Though research notes higher levels of job satisfaction among home workers, it also notes an encroachment of work beyond regular hours, an increased difficulty in switching off at the end of the day, and social isolation associated with being away from coworkers (Felstead and Henseke 2017). Some have noted that the reported impacts of working from home have been contradictory (Boell et al. 2016), with some studies showing positive and others negative impacts on (for example) work-life balance (Perrons 2003; James 2011). Indeed, work itself, and therefore the effects of working from home, are likely to be highly variable within sectors and even within firms (Shoenberger 1996). There is also an ambivalence in the working from home literature given that it rarely questions the respective societal and conceptual meaning of “work” and “home” and their relationship to the structure of capitalist patriarchy. More important for my argument, is how particular regimes of work in the home (as both social reproduction and production) reinscribe particular relations of power, create new meanings of work and home, and reinforce or resist the hegemony of work that seems increasingly unquestionable in everyday life (Weeks 2011).

This section has examined the various kinds of work that take place in the home, building on feminist definitions of work that foreground social reproduction (and the gendered dynamics therein) upon which production is structurally dependent. I discussed, in turn, social reproduction, informal paid and unpaid work in the home, and self-employed and employee-based work in the home, as a starting point for conceptualizing what pandemic-imposed work from home (for those to whom they apply) measures mean given the various forms of work already taking place in the home. I argue that these insights provide us with a valuable starting point for understanding the pandemic-induced work from home measures that are affecting an estimated 40% of Canadian workers. In the next section I examine this discourse of telework capacity alongside another similar discourse, digital by default, building on the critical review of feminist literature in this section to examine the assumptions, omissions, and omissions built into these discourses.

### Digital by default during and after the pandemic

Estimations of Canada’s telework capacity and digital by default decisions occlude a number of social relations upon which this supposed capacity to work from home depends. These discourses make assumptions about the kinds of workers and home spaces amenable to working from home, who will be responsible for the childcare and social reproduction (that remains disproportionately undertaken by women) with which it will overlap, and ignore an international division of labour on which the production of consumer electronics (and other goods) that allow those in the Global North to work from home depends. These tropes hide the structural dependency of the well-paid and privileged work in Canada on social reproduction and lower-class, precarious, disposable forms of work, and on work in other parts of the world, even as some of these forms of work may or may not be officially termed “essential work” by national governments in light of the pandemic (Stevano et al. 2020). Telework capacity also signals a significant opportunity for tertiary and quaternary sector firms and organizations, who are thinking about what the pandemic offers them in terms of finding ways to save costs under the guise of emergency circumstances, while valuations and share prices rise. Yet, many firms are being more cautious than Shopify in their decision making, taking a wait-and-see approach that allows for employees to adjust slowly to new circumstances.
Prior to the pandemic, some white-collar firms had already been tending toward renting less space than required to accommodate their total workforce at a given time as a cost-saving mechanism in light of rising commercial real-estate costs (Lapierre et al. 2016), and as suggested by the increase in circumstances of involuntary telework noted above. While the pandemic may further exacerbate this trend, working from home also allows firms to offset other costs to employees. These other costs include—most significantly—utilities such as electricity, water, gas, internet, and phone bills; office equipment; and liability insurance. Some studies estimate the cost of compensating workers for these offset costs at nearly US$6,000 per worker per year (Shearmur 2000), while others note—in evidence of this shift—that home electricity usage in Ontario increased 15% during the pandemic (Worth and Karaagac 2020). In some cases, like the highly aestheticized “luxury” workplaces of some digital media firms, these costs include perks such as food and beverages ranging from tea and coffee to snacks and catered meals, and a wide range of other amenities, from on-site gyms to game rooms (Pratt 2002). For the majority of workplaces that didn’t include these perks, there may be negative impacts on local businesses close to workplaces who lose clientele as a result of working from home measures. Working from home may mean layoffs for employed or contracted custodial and food-service workers who also work in office spaces. While workers may save on the cost of paying for food and drink at work, and on commuting, these savings may not make up for increased costs associated with working full-time at home. Firms may provide a fund on top of a pay cheque to allow workers to cover the costs noted above, though most will not, and such a fund is unlikely to cover all additional costs for workers. The calculation for firms is whether a real or perceived productivity loss offsets the amount saved on office rental and associated costs.

In addition to passing the costs of maintaining offices space onto workers, thereby decreasing the share of their after-tax pay that can be spent on themselves, there is also the question of whose homes and living circumstances are amenable to being used as a space of paid work. The central and discriminatory hubris in Lütke’s digital by default decision is the belief that it is easy for white-collar work to be undertaken from anywhere. This notion is based on a narrow understanding of the digital entrepreneur-worker who is presumed single, young, white, and a man who either lives alone or has space for a home office (Gill 2014). Those with children or other dependents for whom they are responsible for long-term care—or simply those who live with others—will find enforced working from home less amenable. Those living in smaller homes or apartments, which applies disproportionately to those living in cities, will also find working from home more challenging. While Reuschke (2016) has aptly considered housing in relation to self-employment choices, housing may become increasingly relevant in terms of whether people apply to work for digital by default firms. The result could be that some—in particular those with families—leave to find other jobs that provide office space, while others will not apply for these jobs in the first place. This will limit the number of applicants for job postings, resulting in a further reproduction of narrow and discriminatory hiring practices around gendered and racialized notions of cultural fit organized around the meritocracy myth (Cockayne 2018; Rivera 2012). “Cultural fit,” in this case, will include those who can adapt their home space to also function as an office, that is, those upon whom employers are able to offset more of their fixed costs. The presence of a physical office, opposed to an expectation that workers provide their own office space, could become a new marker of class privilege in post-pandemic labour markets.

Premising employees’ working arrangements on the idea that homes can be easily converted into offices—and largely ignoring the regimes of social reproduction that define home spaces—makes further assumptions about the lives of current and prospective workers. The idea that the home is a safe and equitable space—idealized and romanticized as one of warmth, love, and comfort, and easily able to accommodate both work and care—connotes an unrealistic and privileged image of home that has long been the subject of feminist critique (Blunt 2005). These assumptions ignore victims of domestic violence—disproportionately women and LGBTQ people—and those at risk of eviction. This is compounded by the link between gentrification and rising rates of eviction that are often associated, especially in urban areas, with digital media firms amenable to working from home narratives (McElroy 2017). Research points...
to an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic, related to couples spending more time together in close proximity due to lockdown and work from home measures (Taub 2020). Beyond unsafe circumstances, there are many reasons to seek a separation between work and home, such as having time away from parents, partners, children, or roommates. Enforced working from home puts strain on intergenerational households, increasingly common in the Canada, since more young people are living with their parents given both rising real-estate prices and the stagnation of real-wage growth (Tomaszczyk and Worth 2018).

Regimes of social reproduction and care are the most important areas that are likely to be impacted by enforced working from home during and following the pandemic (MacLeavy 2020). Women have become disproportionately responsible for domestic and childcare tasks during the pandemic, with analysis showing that working mothers have been more negatively affected by disruptions to work than working fathers (Cohen and Hsu 2020; Hjálmzdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2020; Manzo and Minello 2020; Minello 2020). In the Australian context, men and women's daily unpaid work rose by 3.5 hours and 4.5 hours respectively (Craig and Churchill 2020). Those having to work from home may find it impossible to do so if they are simultaneously responsible for both care and home-schooling for their children. This is salient as childcare and schooling options are unpredictably impacted by waves of exposure leading to both outbreaks among schools or individual caregivers and widespread regional, provincial, or national lockdown. Those with the option to return to the office may be unable to do so if schools are closed or childcare options are unavailable.

The pandemic will exacerbate the negative characteristics of working from home noted in the previous section, especially in circumstances where continued working from home is not a voluntary arrangement. Feelings of social isolation with implications for the mental health of workers are likely to increase, especially for those who enjoyed being in the office and were able to form interpersonal relationships through work, or those who enjoyed a spatial separation between their home and their work. Teams may be less effective in a more hybrid working environment (van der Lippe and Lippényi 2019), which can have negative impacts on employees' experience of work, as well as on opportunities for advancement. Surveillance and digital Taylorism will increase as employers' concerns about productivity rise (Huws 2016). We already saw evidence of this prior to the pandemic, and there are various subtle and fine-grained ways for employers to keep tabs on worker activity via employer-licensed software, from Slack to Skype. Collective action may be stymied when workers are physically separate from one another and when communication between workers except via employer-monitored channels is discouraged (Hodder 2020).

Research on work during and following the pandemic must conceptualize how home spaces and regimes of social reproduction—even more undeniably than before—overlap and are combined with regimes of waged and salaried work. This research must seek to understand how new working arrangements are connected with international divisions of labour and dependent upon insecure “essential workers” domestically and abroad. It must also recognize how the act of classifying some workers as “essential” and others as not has a disciplinary effect that may mark particular workers as disposable rather than societally valuable (Stevano et al. 2020). Nation-states have applied the “essential worker” category differently, and while there is opportunity to productivity politicize such categories, there is also a danger of tokenism that puts these workers at risk. For essential workers in Canada, telework capacity and a firm's digital by default policies depend on and are constituted by those categorized as “essential workers” by the Canadian government. They are further affected by an unacknowledged international division of labour and an exploitative supply chain of consumer electronics assembly and manufacture undertaken by workers in other parts of the world (Gregg 2008). Common examples include Foxconn’s underpaid and poorly treated workers in China and elsewhere (Chan et al. 2013), and some of their consumer electronics components are produced by forced (i.e., slave) labour performed by Uyghur and other ethnic minority groups held in labour camps (Xu et al. 2020). We could point as well to racialized histories of semiconductor in- and out-sourced production (e.g., Nakamura 2014) to show how Canada’s telework capacity and the relative “flexibility” of labour is actively produced as a result of the international division of labour, the continuing
violences of the colonial state, and racial capitalism on a global scale (Mezzandri 2020). Indeed, the contours of those designated by terms like “essential worker” or “telework capacity” betray a classed, gendered, and racialized dynamic that is both national and international.

As I've argued, feminist economic geography provides an imperative starting point for theorizing pandemic-related changes to working patterns; the tendency to ignore various kinds of work—both domestically and abroad—upon which the worker's reproduction depends should be rendered untenable in new working from home realities (MacLeavy 2020). In the previous section, I demonstrated this by drawing attention to the various ways that feminist economic geographers and other scholars theorized work as both production and social reproduction. In this section, I have applied these insights to expose assumptions built into two key discourses on pandemic-induced working from home: telework capacity and digital by default. There is a long history of feminist writing on both work and social reproduction, in and beyond geography, that should facilitate a careful theorization of work after COVID-19, which considers how unpaid or underpaid forms of work intersect spatially and conceptually with production for the market. There is an urgent need to critically examine how capital will take advantage of the pandemic in ways that further decrease workers’ share of overall wealth by encroaching on home spaces. The classed, gendered, and racialized increase in income and wealth inequality in the Global North is only likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic. There is a need for both theoretical and practical insight into the changing societal meanings of work and home, the appropriation of home spaces by capital, thinking through uneven development in terms of regimes of social reproduction, and further examining racial capitalism as it pertains to the increased interface between unpaid and paid work in the home.

**Conclusion**

The suggestion that the office is dead is reactionary and hyperbolic, and the extreme digital by default example being set by Shopify and other digital media firms is unlikely to become the norm. Yet COVID-19 will transform the landscape of work and the spatial relationship between the home and the office, in particular for those who have the capacity to work from home for some or all of their work week, and those with whom these workers live. Offices are unlikely to be digital by default for all employees, yet it is likely that remote and telework will become a much more normalized feature of modern work for organizations with a high telework capacity. Hybrid models that mix remote and in-office work will become more common. This connotes a further increase in “flexibility”—a term often used to veil labour market deregulation (Gregg 2008; Peck 2002)—in which work encroaches more on our lives conceptually, rhetorically, and materially. Employers will be able to save on commercial real estate and associated costs, while pushing those costs onto workers without a comparative increase in compensation.

The pandemic may present an opportunity for labour as well as for capital, in the sense that uncertainties around the future of work may be productive for both groups if approached in inventive ways (Ceuterick 2020). Indeed, we should be suspicious of anyone touting a desire to return to “normal” without accounting for whom such normality has been beneficial in the past (Branicki 2020)—that is, primarily for white, wealthy, straight, and cisgender people. Ceuterick (2020) notes that, historically, public health crises have led to positive social change; for example, the 1918 influenza epidemic contributed to the development of health services in the United Kingdom. An affirmative feminist stance allows us to consider how exacerbating inequalities may overlap with transformative social change, albeit perhaps only in a limited way and for some more than others. Sultana and Ravanera (2020), drawing on a feminist intersectional analysis, make a series of praxis and policy recommendations for post-pandemic recovery that take seriously the gendered and racialized inequalities perpetuated therein. Their approach centres on analyzing power relations and addressing systematic inequality, while foregrounding care work and small businesses. Pandemic recovery may, for example, be commensurate with global climate action since working from home may result in a net reduction of emissions on a per-employee basis primarily by reducing (or eliminating) commuting time, alleviating congestion, and contributing to more active transport modes (Elldér 2020).
One significant limitation of the framing that I have presented here is that it may be construed as reinforcing a technological exceptionalism in which firms like Shopify are examined over and above other kinds of firms, of which a wide variety are operating under similar telework capacity but have not made such sweeping statements regarding digital by default. Yet, it is also clear that examining the actions of digital media firms is useful for exposing the implications, assumptions, and occlusions embedded in digital by default messaging, especially since these firms are often considered a bellwether for economic change and worthy of imitation through mobile regional policy-making (Mould 2018). Yet, the vast majority of tertiary and quaternary sector firms and organizations in Canada have not made definitive public statements about their return to work plans, displaying reticence around whether they intend to retain permanent work from home policies or not.

One important avenue of future research could be to substantively document different firms’ approaches toward working from home in order to track similarities and differences across sectors with telework capacity. This would be especially useful since many firms have not made public statements about their approaches, preferring, prudently, to communicate only with their employees. There is a need too to address gaps in policy discourse, which often ignores those who neither have telework capacity nor are considered “essential workers.” For those sectors with a significant telework capacity, we are likely to see a hybridization of working practices as an expected, permanent, albeit part-time feature of modern work. While not as dramatic as a digital by default policy, the implications of hybridization may be just as far reaching and have just as much impact on the relationship between home and work, as well as their respective conceptual and practical meanings. As these meanings shift and transform, categories such as production and social reproduction, formality and informality, remuneration and lack thereof, must be centred in analyses. Feminist economic geography shows how the ability for some to work from home is structurally dependent upon numerous, often unacknowledged, economic conditions explored in the above sections. Some of these economic conditions are themselves undervalued forms of work, like social reproduction, still disproportionately undertaken by women, and consumer electronics production in the Global South. Studies of working from home during and following the COVID-19 pandemic must therefore retain close attention to how various forms of social difference—domestically and abroad—are embedded in these economic conditions as they relate to the reproduction of inequalities that continues to structure work in contemporary society.

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