

Exploring the Dichotomy of Beauty:
Agency and Victimhood in the Commodification of Appearance

Andres Sanjuan

Gerrit Rietveld Academie

Photography Department

14th of May, 2025

Abstract:

This thesis investigates beauty as both a source of capital and a site of constraint in transactional economies, through an in-depth case study of Angela—a high-end escort operating in a regulated market. Using a reflexive, qualitative approach, it explores the intersections of beauty, power, visibility, and emotional labor.

Angela's narrative complicates binary framings of empowerment and exploitation, illustrating the nuanced negotiations of aesthetic labor. Her story reveals how beauty can be strategically deployed for socio-economic mobility, even as it reinforces systemic asymmetries.

Drawing on interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives and the researcher's embedded position within beauty economies, the thesis offers a detailed exploration of how beauty is lived, regulated, and contested in contemporary contexts.

Introduction:

In today's society, beauty has evolved from a passive aesthetic trait into a potent form of social currency. Individuals leverage their appearance to access economic, social, cultural, and erotic capital. This commodification generates paradoxes: individuals become both agents utilizing their appearance for upward mobility and subjects shaped by transactional structures that impose normative constraints.

This thesis investigates the complex relationship between beauty and power, analyzing how beauty acts simultaneously as opportunity and burden in shaping personal and professional pathways. Through a qualitative case study of Angela—a high-end escort working in a regulated system—it explores the psychological, social, and economic implications of aesthetic labor. Rather than reinforcing binary categories of agency or victimhood, the study foregrounds how individuals negotiate shifting positions along a spectrum of constraint and autonomy.

In the digital age, beauty's influence has intensified. Platforms like Instagram and OnlyFans have created new avenues for visibility and profit, while amplifying scrutiny and vulnerability. Social media influencers, fashion models, and sex workers operate in highly surveilled spaces where desirability becomes both asset and liability. This thesis examines how these actors manage such demands, navigating between commodification and resistance.

The analysis is grounded in theoretical contributions from bell hooks, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Melissa Gira Grant. hooks' intersectional critique of beauty exposes the racialized and classed structures of aesthetic capital. Butler's theory of performativity provides tools to understand how desirability is enacted and sustained. Foucault's concepts of discipline and surveillance clarify how beauty becomes a site of self-regulation. Grant's analysis of sex work as labor contextualizes beauty within economies of intimacy, highlighting the simultaneous presence of empowerment and structural exploitation.

Drawing on in-depth qualitative methods, the research reveals recurring patterns of negotiation, boundary-setting, and adaptation. It pays particular attention to how individuals redefine agency within systems that prize external validation over intrinsic value.

Ultimately, this study challenges binary framings of empowerment and exploitation by illuminating how beauty operates as both leverage and limitation. Angela's narrative, alongside theoretical critique, reveals the multifaceted roles beauty plays in navigating power, performance, and identity within contemporary aesthetic economies.

Research Question:

How does one individual working within a beauty economy navigate the liminal space between agency and victimhood, and what internal and external forces shape this negotiation?

Declaration of Intent:

This thesis does not advocate for a binary reading of beauty labor as either agency or victimhood. Instead, it investigates the nuanced and often unstable terrain in between. Discourses surrounding beauty commodification are frequently reduced to polarities—empowerment versus exploitation, autonomy versus coercion, choice versus constraint. Such frameworks fail to capture the layered and shifting experiences of those embedded within these economies.

Through the focused case study of Angela, the research seeks to understand how one navigates these complexities. By prioritizing depth over breadth, the study explores how individual agency is performed under structural pressure, how empowerment is shaped by economic need and social norms, and how participation in beauty economies often entails subtle forms of negotiation and compromise.

Rather than making generalized claims, this thesis foregrounds lived experience as a lens through which broader dynamics can be examined. Angela's story is situated within a theoretical constellation that makes visible the contradictions inherent in commodified beauty—where self-determination is continuously redefined in relation to systems of regulation, validation, and performance.

This is a study of thresholds, of in-betweenness. It investigates how agency is enacted, how desirability is curated, and how beauty is both opportunity and liability in a tightly governed economy of appearance.

This thesis employs a single-subject case study methodology centered on Angela, a high-end escort working within a legalized and regulated sex work framework. The original research design intended to include multiple participants, but the depth and clarity of Angela's narrative warranted a more concentrated, in-depth approach. Her experiences provided a unique opportunity to closely examine the complexities of beauty commodification in a highly structured aesthetic economy.

Methodology

The methodological framework is qualitative and reflexive, built on open-ended, conversational interviews. These dialogues were designed to allow Angela to articulate her experiences in her own terms, while also inviting the researcher to participate vulnerably and transparently. This reciprocal method blurs the line between subject and observer, creating a dynamic space of co-produced knowledge.

The researcher's own position as a photographer embedded within adjacent beauty economies shaped both access and interpretation. This insider status is acknowledged not as a bias to be eliminated but as a standpoint that adds depth and ethical awareness to the research process.

The interview/open-end conversation work followed rigorous ethical protocols. The participant provided informed consent, with options for anonymity and confidentiality. Formal model and media release forms were used where applicable. Angela's story is not treated as universally representative but as a richly situated account that opens a window onto larger questions of power, labor, and aesthetic value.

Theoretical Framework:

Michel Foucault and the Regulation of Beauty

Michel Foucault's theories of biopower, surveillance, and self-discipline offer a vital framework for analyzing beauty commodification. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault explores how power operates not merely through external enforcement, but through internalized norms that compel individuals to regulate themselves. When applied to beauty, this suggests that individuals engage in self-surveillance, maintaining their bodies according to market demands for visibility and desirability.

This framework clarifies how the labor of grooming, dieting, cosmetic modification, and digital self-curation transforms individuals into what Foucault calls "docile bodies"—subjects who regulate themselves to meet standards they did not create. Beauty labor, then, is not merely self-expression or economic strategy; it is embedded within disciplinary systems that shape both desire and its performance.

However, Foucault also emphasizes that power is not monolithic. Even within systems of control, there is space for resistance and strategic maneuvering. Angela's practices—curating her online presence, selecting clients, and setting boundaries—exemplify how beauty laborers may use their knowledge of social norms to subvert or manipulate them for autonomy. The tension between internalized discipline and strategic agency is central to understanding how beauty operates in transactional contexts, particularly in digitally mediated economies where constant visibility is demanded.

bell hooks and the Intersectionality of Beauty

bell hooks provides an essential corrective to universalist assumptions about beauty as capital. In *Black Looks* (1992) and *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981), she critiques how Eurocentric and patriarchal systems have historically defined beauty in exclusionary terms, marginalizing Black women and other non-normative bodies. Her work foregrounds the racialized, gendered, and classed hierarchies embedded in aesthetic economies.

Hooks' intersectional approach reveals that access to beauty economies—and the ability to weaponize beauty for social or economic gain—is deeply stratified. While some individuals may leverage beauty as capital, others are positioned outside these circuits altogether, encountering aesthetic norms as mechanisms of erasure rather than empowerment. This contextualizes Angela's ambivalent experiences with desirability: though she benefits from certain aesthetic privileges, her height, tattoos, and expressive sexual agency often render her hypervisible in ways that complicate inclusion in normative beauty standards.

Importantly, hooks does not negate agency. She emphasizes that reclamation and resistance are possible, even within systems designed to exclude. Angela's shift from early self-destructive behavior to deliberate, self-curated labor aligns with hooks' notion of healing through re-embodiment and self-definition. Still, hooks reminds us that agency must always be situated—conditioned by structures that determine who can be seen, desired, or rewarded.

Judith Butler and the Performativity of Beauty

Judith Butler's theory of performativity, developed in *Gender Trouble* (1990), reframes gender and beauty as effects of repeated acts rather than intrinsic attributes. Beauty, in this view, is not possessed but enacted—sustained through stylized repetitions that align with dominant norms.

This insight is critical to understanding how desirability is not merely seen but performed. In sex work, social media, or modeling, individuals must continuously reiterate legible versions of attractiveness, shaped by what audiences or clients deem valuable. Angela's performances—whether in curated photosets or client interactions—are not fabrications but strategic amplifications of certain traits. Her awareness of this performance underscores Butler's claim: the authentic self is not prior to performance but constituted through it.

Yet Butler's emphasis on symbolic construction can obscure the material realities that shape and constrain these performances. While she reveals how norms are enacted, she gives less attention to how they are commodified and monetized. By integrating Butler's insights with Hakim's economic framing, this thesis bridges the symbolic and material, showing how beauty is both a performed identity and a form of labor subject to valuation, competition, and exhaustion.

Melissa Gira Grant and the Politics of Sex Work

In *Playing the Whore* (2014), Melissa Gira Grant challenges moralistic and binary narratives about sex work, framing it instead as labor. She argues that sex work should be understood like any other service job—subject to economic conditions, labor rights, and negotiations of power.

This labor-centered lens is particularly useful for understanding Angela's trajectory. Her experience defies simplistic categorizations of exploitation or liberation. She negotiates pricing, screens clients, and controls the conditions of her work—all hallmarks of labor autonomy. At the same time, she is subject to structural pressures: competition, client expectations, and the emotional toll of affective labor.

Where Grant's framework is less developed is in addressing the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of sex work—the performative labor of femininity, desirability, and emotional caretaking. Angela's work involves more than physical labor; it demands performance, empathy, and psychic resilience. Integrating Butler's and hooks' insights into Grant's labor framework allows this thesis to analyze sex work as beauty labor: an arena where economic, aesthetic, and affective demands converge.

Katherine Hakim and the Unequal Power of Erotic Capital

Katherine Hakim's concept of erotic capital, articulated in *Honey Money* (2011), describes beauty, charm, and sexual appeal as potent but underacknowledged forms of capital. She argues that erotic capital can offer women economic and social advantages, allowing them to navigate systems otherwise stacked against them.

While Hakim's framing is provocative, it risks universalizing access to erotic capital and ignoring how structural inequities mediate its use. Beauty is not an equal-opportunity resource. Race, class, gender identity, ability, and geography shape both the ability to perform desirability and the returns that desirability can yield. Angela's experience reflects this contradiction: she successfully capitalizes on her erotic appeal, but only through careful branding, emotional labor, and negotiation of norms that often exclude those who don't conform.

Hakim's model, when critically applied, reveals both the promise and brutality of beauty as capital. It helps explain why erotic capital can be empowering, but also why its rewards are unequally distributed and fraught with ambivalence. Paired with hooks, Butler, and Grant, her work rounds out the thesis' theoretical palette, offering a framework for analyzing how beauty is lived not as pure capital, but as a conditional, contested form of labor power.

Case Study: Beauty as Both Asset and Liability

Angela, a 33-year-old independent escort and digital content creator, provides a richly layered case study for examining how beauty operates as both leverage and liability in contemporary aesthetic economies. Her trajectory—from modeling to webcamming, OnlyFans, and high-end escorting—illustrates how individuals navigate multiple tiers of the beauty economy, each with its own demands, affordances, and constraints.

Unlike many who enter sex work under financial duress, Angela's entry was marked by strategic agency. She selects her clients, defines her working conditions, and maintains strong personal and professional boundaries. Her self-curated niche centers on individuals often excluded from normative sexual scripts: those with social anxiety, physical disabilities, or limited sexual experience. Through platforms like TikTok, Angela not only destigmatizes sex work but also attracts a client base aligned with her values—emphasizing care, consent, and emotional safety.

Angela's ability to exert control over her labor conditions is inseparable from her position as a white woman from a Central European city, with access to family support and the cultural capital to navigate digital and legal infrastructures with relative ease. These privileges—often unspoken in mainstream narratives of sex work—afford her a degree of mobility and safety that is not evenly distributed across racialized, migrant, or lower-class sex workers. Her whiteness and Western-European context render her both more legible and more protected within certain aesthetic and economic circuits, which amplifies the returns on her erotic capital while shielding her from some of its harsher penalties.

Angela's experience offers a concrete expression of Katherine Hakim's erotic capital: beauty deployed strategically for economic and social autonomy. Yet, her story also engages with Michel Foucault's account of self-surveillance and disciplinary power, revealing how beauty labor demands constant emotional and physical regulation. Judith Butler's theory of performativity further illuminates how Angela's desirability is not static but constructed—performed through a careful balance of authenticity and legibility. Her labor is not just physical or aesthetic, but also affective: managing vulnerability, desire, and projection within a commercial frame.

This case complicates simplistic binaries of empowerment and exploitation. Angela resists victimhood narratives through self-definition and control, yet her participation still unfolds within systemic norms that shape value, desirability, and access. Her ability to reject clients or set boundaries is hard-won, and her success is contingent on a broader set of aesthetic and social privileges.

As such, Angela's story is not an outlier but an entry point—offering insight into how beauty workers contend with structural pressures while crafting space for agency. It grounds the thesis' theoretical framework in lived experience, preparing the terrain for future cross-cultural comparisons and broader reflections on how beauty is capitalized, contested, and lived.

Angela's Perception of Beauty, Height, and Self-Perception in Relation to Erotic Capital

Angela's reflections on her height and appearance reveal how erotic capital is not simply possessed—it must be recognized and claimed. Despite being conventionally attractive, Angela internalized negative perceptions about her body. She recalls how public attention was interpreted through a lens of alienation rather than desirability:

"I know a lot of people would stare because of that and make comments because of that. So even if someone would stare at me because they would find me very attractive, I would always think it's because I'm freakishly tall, and they think like I'm a freak show."

Her experience underscores the subjectivity of desirability. External validation did not immediately translate into self-recognition of power. Judith Butler's theory of performativity is instructive here: social norms not only dictate how beauty must be performed but also how it is interpreted and internalized. For Angela, beauty initially functioned as a source of dissonance rather than empowerment.

This changed when she entered sex work. Angela describes a pivotal shift in her relationship to her appearance:

"It took me until I started doing sex work to realize I can, I can use this to my advantage."

This moment represents not just a shift in profession, but a reorientation of self-perception. Erotic capital, as Katherine Hakim frames it, became something Angela could finally leverage—but only through an industry that explicitly commodifies appearance. This delayed recognition complicates the narrative of erotic capital as a readily available resource.

Angela's case shows that beauty capital is not automatic—it is conditioned by internal narratives and external structures. Her transformation did not involve altering her body but reframing how she saw and used it. This

realignment mirrors Foucault's idea of biopower: not only are bodies regulated by external forces, but individuals also learn to govern themselves according to marketable scripts of desirability.

Ultimately, Angela's story complicates the equation of beauty with agency. She gains autonomy through sex work, yet that agency is shaped by an economy that monetizes appearance. Her case makes clear that erotic capital is not merely about aesthetics—it is about perception, labor, and power, all negotiated within systems that reward legibility and punish deviance.

The Client's Perspective and the Nature of Performativity

For many of Angela's clients, the encounter offers far more than physical pleasure—it becomes a site of validation, intimacy, and emotional anchoring. These clients often arrive with little sexual experience, social anxiety, or past trauma, and seek not just touch, but understanding. Angela's ability to hold space for these needs reflects Michel Foucault's concept of biopower: clients regulate their behavior and expectations, while Angela simultaneously self-regulates to maintain professionalism, care, and control.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity deepens this understanding. Angela insists she isn't "playing a character," yet she admits to emphasizing certain parts of her personality to meet client expectations:

"I'm not really playing a character; I'm just enhancing certain aspects of myself that align with what my clients need."

This fluid, adaptive performance exemplifies Butler's notion that identity is constituted through repetition and audience recognition. Angela performs a version of herself that is legible to her clientele—strategically managing affect and aesthetics in ways that feel both authentic and curated. The boundaries between real and role, labor and intimacy, remain intentionally blurred.

Professional Boundaries and Agency

A central thread in Angela's story is the intentional drawing and defending of boundaries. Her transition from agency-based escorting to independent work was motivated by a desire to regain control—over her schedule, her clientele, and the conditions of her labor. Agency work, she explains, often pushed her beyond her limits:

"The agency would call me even when I had no availability. They would push me to work more."

This coercive dynamic reflects a broader theme in sex work economies: even within legal frameworks, power imbalances persist when third parties profit from laborers' availability and compliance.

By shifting to independent escorting, Angela enacted a form of self-discipline aligned with Michel Foucault's notion of regulated subjectivity. She eliminated intermediaries, established clear policies with clients, and created a system where emotional and physical sustainability took precedence over volume. Her approach is not merely about autonomy—it's about crafting a sustainable mode of labor that resists burnout and centers personal integrity.

Angela's boundaries are strategic, but also ethical. They are acts of refusal as much as assertion: refusal of overwork, of exploitation, of emotional depletion. In this, her labor becomes a negotiation between care for others and care for self—a tension that defines much of the affective economy in which she operates.

Rewriting the Self: Beauty, Agency, and Therapeutic Labor

Angela's story troubles the binary between victimhood and empowerment by showing how sex work can become a means of psychic reorganization, not through escape from power, but through its reconfiguration. Her experience demands an intersectional theoretical frame—one that combines Butler's performativity, Foucault's disciplinary subjectivity, hooks' critique of racialized patriarchal beauty, and Grant's materialist lens on sex work as labor.

"I had really low self-worth... I was just sleeping around with everyone, hoping, okay, if I do that, you know, maybe they'll like me... I think I was trying to look for some sort of approval from men that I didn't get from my father."

This early dynamic—where Angela seeks visibility and value through sexual access—echoes Butler's theory of gender as performative constraint: to be recognized as feminine, and therefore as valuable, one must perform submission within dominant scripts of desirability. But Angela's performance is not simply about gender—it is also shaped by absence, emotional abandonment, and psychic fragmentation. I just had, like, no self-worth... I wasn't even, I didn't even know that saying no was an option.

bell hooks' intersectional critique deepens this reading by situating Angela's lack of self-worth within broader cultural structures that conflate femininity with sexual availability and emotional service. Angela's earlier sexuality was not autonomous—it was overdetermined by a social order that equates femininity with access and compliance. The affective void left by paternal neglect was filled not with intimacy, but with erotic offering.

Now, Angela engages in the same acts—sex with strangers—but under radically transformed conditions:

“Now I'm so in control... like everything is built from scratch by me. I'm profiting off of something that was damaging me beforehand... Having sex with strangers was very self-destructive back then, and now it's gaining me everything.”

Here, Foucault's concept of productive power becomes essential. Angela is not outside structures of discipline or commodification. Rather, she retools them through what Foucault calls “*technologies of the self*.” Her aesthetic labor—client selection, pricing, boundary setting, and persona curation—is both affective and administrative. Through these systems, she reclaims agency without denying that she remains entangled in broader systems of commodified femininity.

Angela describes this transformation not as transcendence, but as a deliberate reworking of past harm:

“There's something healing about it... I get to recreate that moment, but with rules. With clarity.”

Through repetition with structure, Angela re-encounters trauma under new terms. Her labor becomes a way to metabolize the past—returning to the same site (sex) but now with tools that protect, frame, and re-signify.

Angela's clients often reflect the parts of herself she once could not tend to: the shy, the inexperienced, the ashamed.

“I know what it feels like to feel unwanted. And now I'm the person who gets to say, it's okay.”

This care is not sentimental—it's skilled. She offers safety, but not sacrifice.

This is where Melissa Gira Grant's framework provides crucial grounding. Grant reframes sex work not as deviance or salvation, but as labor. Angela's story validates this view—but adds something Grant leaves underexplored: the psychic feedback loop wherein labor becomes therapy. Angela's labor is reparative not only for clients, but for herself.

Still, she maintains boundaries that protect her psychic integrity.

“They feel very connected to me. I don't... I don't think about it. I literally, when you would ask me who I saw yesterday evening, I would really have to think.”

This practice of detachment is not disassociation—it is “the switch”:

“There is this natural detachment. There's this switch... I'm still me, but detached from the person I'm gonna see... I can give a lot without getting invested in the person.”

Her care is calibrated, not indiscriminate. She gives generously, but within a frame that sustains her. This is affective boundary work—necessary in a context where intimacy is monetized.

“I'm doing the same thing. I'm just now being smart about it... I can still use what I've already done in the past, but I can do it in a healthy way.”

The psychic significance of this distinction cannot be overstated. Her history is not erased—it is revised. Through work, she performs a new relation to her past.

This is Butler's performativity not as entrapment but as potential: through iteration, through reframing, Angela enacts herself differently. This is Foucault's disciplinary subject remaking the terms of their submission, and Grant's sex worker as strategist, not just survivor. It is hooks' insight that healing comes not from rejecting femininity, but from rewriting its meaning.

Angela's labor is thus emotional, economic, psychic, and political. She is not free of beauty's structures—but she is fluent in them. Her work reveals not the disappearance of discipline, but the emergence of agency within it.

Researcher Positioning: Dual Economies, Porous Roles, and the Two -Shoots-Within-the-Shoot

The photographic component of this thesis was not supplementary—it was central. It was also conditional. Angela agreed to participate in the research under a clear, reciprocal agreement: in exchange for her time, openness, and contribution to the project, I would photograph her for her professional escorting website and social media platforms. This negotiation did not merely grant me access; it defined the research context. The thesis emerged not in a neutral observational space, but in a transactional one, where visibility and representation were bartered across overlapping economies of labor, trust, and aesthetic capital. The space in which knowledge was produced was not neutral, but co-constructed through aesthetic collaboration, mutual negotiation, and shared fluency in systems of value.

What followed was a collaboration marked by dual intentions. There were, quite literally, two shoots within the shoot. The first was for the thesis—images composed through a documentary lens, restrained, observational, designed to accompany a critical inquiry into beauty commodification. The second was for Angela's practice: images with a different purpose and energy, consciously erotic, polished, and constructed to circulate in commercial digital space. They would be used to attract clients, to sustain desirability, to sell intimacy. Both sets were shot by the same hand, in the same room, under the same light—but they were radically different in function, address, and implied audience.

This split structure revealed the porousness of our roles. As a photographer, I was simultaneously an author and a technician, a documentarian and a service provider. Angela, for her part, moved fluidly between subject, model, strategist, and co-director. Decisions about styling, posing, framing, and tone were made collaboratively, drawing on a shared literacy in visual codes shaped by our mutual experience within adjacent economies of visibility—hers in sex work and online intimacy, mine in fashion, modeling, erotic content production, and visual art. We were not mirroring each other, but we were translating across registers—producing images for different publics, with different stakes, within a shared technical grammar.

The boundary between the two shoots was not always clean. We slipped between them, sometimes without naming it. A pose held too long, an expression tweaked, a shift in lighting that lingered from one set into the next. The gaze of the camera had to serve two masters—one academic, one commercial—and the process of switching between those registers exposed the difficulty of maintaining categorical separation. Our work was structured, but not sterile. It demanded calibration, attention, and affective agility. The shoot became a choreography of intentions: framing, lighting, gesture, and tone were continuously negotiated to satisfy two distinct—but overlapping—economies of purpose.

The emotional tone of the encounter reflected this complexity. Our first meeting had already established a foundation of mutual recognition and curiosity. We shared stories, discomforts, and mirrored tensions—there was a sense of overlapping terrain. By the time of the shoot, there was trust, but also an awareness of performance: of being seen and seeing in return, of constructing visibility together. Photographing someone performing erotic capital for a third-party gaze, while also positioning them within a critical research project, creates a tension that cannot be resolved through academic detachment. It can only be named and worked through.

There was no collapse of professional boundaries, but there was a clear erosion of clarity. The act of photographing itself became a site of co-produced intimacy—not sentimental, but structured. If there was a charge in the room, it was not sensational; it was structural, generated by the conditions of the shoot itself. Angela and I were not reenacting a binary between empowered subject and objective observer. We were inside the system—fluent in its codes, responsive to its demands—each leveraging the other's skillset to produce something useful. Her narrative made my thesis possible. My labor made her digital marketing visible. There was no clean separation between research and service, between artistic framing and commercial delivery.

There is a tendency in academia to sanitize positionality: to frame researcher involvement as bias to be confessed or neutralized. But in beauty economies, where visibility is currency and power is aestheticized, such detachment is a fiction. The project does not pretend to rise above the systems it studies. Instead, it acknowledges that the space of research is already an economy—of time, care, labor, desire, and aesthetic authorship. Angela's image circulates in systems that monetize attention and attraction; so does mine, albeit through different logics and channels. To pretend that one form is pure and the other transactional would be to ignore the mutual dependencies and entanglements that shape both.

What this reveals is not ethical failure, but methodological truth: that within systems governed by visibility, research becomes a form of participation. This project did not observe from a safe position—it facilitated, navigated, and co-authored. The images produced are not documentary evidence, but aesthetic artifacts of entangled labor—bearing the imprint of dual authorship, dual purpose, and dual circulation.

The two shoots within the shoot became a structural metaphor for the thesis itself: an inquiry shaped not by distance but by proximity, by co-dependence, and by the necessary discomfort of working from inside. That is the position from which this thesis speaks—not from authority, but from embedded negotiation.

Conclusion – At a Cost: The Liminal Space Between Victimhood and Agency

Rather than aiming to resolve the tension between empowerment and exploitation in beauty economies, this project set out to inhabit that tension. What emerged through fieldwork, particularly in Angela's narrative, was a terrain marked by contradiction, improvisation, and deeply embodied negotiation. Beauty appeared not as a fixed asset, but as a volatile form of capital—affective, conditional, and exhausting. It functioned as access and surveillance, leverage and liability.

Angela's story disrupted assumptions I carried at the outset. Most notably, her preference for in-person sex work over digital labor inverted dominant narratives about safety, intimacy, and control. Platforms like OnlyFans, often seen as less invasive, became for her sites of emotional depletion and blurred boundaries. By contrast, face-to-face encounters offered structural clarity and emotional detachment. This reversal complicated normative distinctions between physical and emotional exposure, revealing how safety is less about the medium than about agency and architecture.

Beauty emerged as a form of soft power that opens doors while simultaneously encoding expectations onto the body. Its rewards are contingent and distributed unequally, shaped by race, gender, size, and legibility within dominant aesthetics. bell hooks' critique of Eurocentric beauty standards remains foundational here, reminding us that erotic capital is never neutral or universally available—it is conditioned by systems of exclusion.

Angela's ability to leverage her appearance was not innate but constructed—through self-curation, boundary-setting, and affective labor. Her work involved not only maintaining desirability but performing stability, empathy, and containment. As she reflected, "I know what it feels like to feel unwanted. And now I'm the person who gets to say, it's okay." Melissa Gira Grant's framing of sex work as labor helped anchor this perspective, yet Angela's experience also revealed the affective and performative burdens Grant's framework tends to understate. Integrating Grant with Judith Butler's performativity theory highlighted how sex work involves recursive enactments of self in relation to legibility, need, and care.

Butler further sharpened the understanding of beauty as something performed rather than possessed. Angela's labor, especially her persona construction across digital and in-person spaces, exemplifies how gendered desirability is enacted through iterative, socially legible performances. These performances are neither false nor fully free; they are strategic responses to systems that reward particular scripts of femininity.

Michel Foucault's theory of biopower illuminated how beauty labor is shaped by internalized surveillance. Angela's boundaries, availability, and pricing were not simply reactions to clients or platforms—they were anticipatory self-regulations, shaped by norms she had learned to manage. Still, within those constraints, she maneuvered. Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self" captured how Angela used beauty labor not just to survive, but to remake her relation to past harm.

Katherine Hakim's model of erotic capital offered vocabulary for how beauty could be leveraged strategically, but her framework alone proved insufficient. It flattened structural inequities. Placed alongside hooks' critique, a more dimensional view emerged—one that sees beauty not just as advantage, but as a conditional and often costly resource.

Rather than choosing one theoretical lens, I allowed these thinkers to work in tension. Their interplay mirrored Angela's experience: recursive, unstable, and shaped by external pressures and internal recalibrations. Holding their frameworks in dynamic relation enabled a more complex reading of what it means to navigate beauty economies today.

My own position—as a photographer and as someone embedded in visual economies—also demanded reflexivity. The camera did not simply capture Angela's labor; it participated in it. Our sessions were not neutral—they involved mutual presence, subtle negotiation, and the continuous shaping of how beauty is seen and felt. Recognizing this relational dynamic added another layer to the central claim: that beauty, and the labor it demands, is never separable from context, power, and embodiment.

What I hope emerges from this study is not a tidy conclusion, but a more precise vocabulary for speaking about beauty labor. The people who work within these economies do not fall cleanly into categories of victim or agent. Their experiences move across thresholds—of autonomy, exhaustion, negotiation, and performance. Angela's story is not one of transcendence, but of persistence: an ongoing effort to shape meaning, control terms, and find coherence under conditions of profound demand.

Beauty remains layered, dynamic, and unstable. So too are the strategies of those who labor within it.

References

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1975)

Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Volume I: An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York, NY: Pantheon. (Original work published 1976)

Grant, M. G. (2014). *Playing the whore: The work of sex work*. London, UK: Verso.

Hakim, K. (2011). *Honey money: The power of erotic capital*. London, UK: Penguin/Allen Lane.

(Alternatively, if you're citing Hakim's scholarly article rather than her book, use: Hakim, K. (2010). Erotic capital. *European Sociological Review*, 26(5), 499–518.)

hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a woman? Black women and feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.