Desire by Itself

Experience is a structured pattern of focal points and backgrounds. Sexual desire, as an experience, is neither isolated from context nor self-evident, but, like all experience, requires context and interpretation to have sense. The feelings of sexual and emotional connection some feel for people of their gender form in a context that conditions their meaning. The common coming out narrative of “discovering” sexual orientation distorts the actual process, which does not so much discover sexuality as consolidate it through interpretation and the creation of a new identity and a new project of the self. Even though we think that our feelings were always there before coming out, we forget, in the very process of this remembering, that our memory reconstructs the previous feelings in light of what they become. We now feel this way, and this new context projects itself backwards into our past, even without a choice to make a new past for ourselves, and our very feelings change retroactively. And if we could go back, we might very well see that before we came out, our feelings were not simply raw feelings of homosexuality, but ambiguous complexes living in a different context; they may have been alien, separated from the self, refused or denied, and rationalized.

However, this view of experience seems to contradict itself. While I describe how experiences take on meaning in context, the very language of this account seems to imply that something is given prior to its placement in a context. After all, I claim that feelings and desires motivate one to reinterpret these experiences, place them into new contexts, and form new attitudes toward one’s sexuality and one’s world. And I claim that this experience provides something like a counterweight to social circumstance and its creation of this experience. What could these feelings and desires possibly be, if not homosexual feelings? Even if the identity
does influence the sexual feelings that motivate one to adopt the identity, do these feelings not have to fit with the identity to motivate adopting it? It would seem that we must already be gay in the form of our desire for us to be gay in the form of our identity.

For instance, we can imagine that desire exists prior to any conditioning in the young child or infant, and that it takes on the cultural and social conditioning with the maturation process. It surely seems that the desires and impulses of an infant are prelinguistic and precultural. A child who has not yet learned language, who cannot distinguish proper from improper expressions of desire, would be closest to experiencing desire in some unconditioned form. The child would express desire in what seems like the most immediate fashion, a howl of unconditioned need.

Yet adults can have neither experience nor memory of this kind of desire. Not only does the desire live in our distant past, but it remains separated from us precisely because it is prelinguistic and precultural. All the structures of language and culture now condition our interpretation of such experiences. That is, if we could remember this desire, we would have to remember it through the conditions of language and culture, and so it would not be the desire at the start, but its adult interpretation. Much like an anthropologist can never quite live inside another people’s culture, we cannot live with what we were as we were it, we can only know what we were from the standpoint of what we are now. Moreover, we cannot assume that infant sexuality (if such a thing even exists) is truly representative of adult sexuality. Suppose sexual orientation were to be entirely determined by genetics and to be completely isolated from all cultural and social interaction (suppose, in short, the arguments of this book were completely wrong), and suppose really, literally, people were born heterosexual or homosexual, we would still need to assume that there is no real developmental process for sexuality, that somehow what is given at birth is what is given in the adult. However, we can already see that such speculation runs far ahead of the evidence and possibly counter to what we know of human development and certainly (for what it is worth) counter to all of Freudian theory. Sexuality develops in fits and starts, turns back on itself, and surprises us as we grow (again, to say nothing of the Freudian view).

In other words, I reiterate the arguments of the previous chapter, that no experience can escape the condition of being contextual