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"What Is It Like to Become a Bat? Heterogeneities in an Age of Extinction"

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Erev, Stephanie. "What Is It Like to Become a Bat? Heterogeneities in an Age of Extinction." *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2018): 129-49. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-4385498 .

In his celebrated 1974 essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," Thomas Nagel stages a human-bat encounter to illustrate and support his claim that "subjective experience" is irreducible to "objective fact": because Nagel cannot experience the world as a bat does, he will never know what it is like to be one. In Nagel's account, heterogeneity is figured negatively—as a failure or lack of resemblance—and functions to constrain his knowledge of bats. Today, as white-nose syndrome threatens bat populations across North America, might figuring heterogeneity positively, as a condition of creativity, open up new modes of receptivity and responsiveness to species extinctions? This essay turns to philosophies of becoming and to recent research in the biological sciences to explore this possibility. I suggest that attending to the heterogeneity of experience alerts us to more public dimensions of our being and may thereby work against the tendency to understand and experience ourselves as self-contained and closed off from one another and the world we share in common. This may in turn enhance our sense of entanglement with the events, bodies, and forces on the "outside" of experience, including bats and the white-nose syndrome with which they are afflicted today. Such an affirmation of heterogeneity as a condition of creativity holds the greatest promise for multispecies ethics today, I propose, when it is joined to an affirmation of incompatibilities within and between things as a real force of suffering and destruction in a heterogeneous world. (Text from author's abstract)

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