

literatur für leser

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39. Jahrgang

Literatur und Geologie

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PETER LANG
EDITION

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herausgegeben von: Keith Bullivant, Ingo Cornils, Carsten Jakobi, Bernhard Spies, Sabine Wilke
Peer Review: literatur fur leser ist peer reviewed. Alle bei der Redaktion eingehenden Beitrage werden anonymisiert an alle Herausgeber weitergegeben und von allen begutachtet. Jeder Herausgeber hat ein Vetorecht.

Verlag und Anzeigenverwaltung: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Postfach 94 02 25, 60460 Frankfurt/M.,
Telefon: 069 / 78 07 050, Telefax 069 / 78 07 05 50

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Erscheinungsweise: 4mal jahrlich
Marz/Juni/September/Dezember

Bezugsbedingungen:

Jahresabonnement EUR 49,95; Jahresabonnement für Studenten EUR 22,--; Einzelheft EUR 13,95. Alle Preise verstehen sich zuzüglich Porto und Verpackung. Abonnements können mit einer Frist von 8 Wochen zum Jahresende gekündigt werden. Alle Beiträge sind urheberrechtlich geschützt. Übersetzung, Nachdruck, Vervielfältigung auf photomechanischem oder ähnlichem Wege, Vortrag, Funk- und Fernsehsendung sowie Speicherung in Datenverarbeitungsanlagen – auch auszugsweise – bleiben vorbehalten.

A Mineral Biography of the City

For years, the skyscrapers in New York were firmly planted in Mid-town and down at the end of the island not by choice, but because there the dense Pegmatite-rich rock was exposed at the surface—Mica Schist strong enough to hold the weight of towers. This same type of rock inhabits the coast of Maine, vast areas of Scotland and Riverside Park along the Hudson. As a kid, I knew Mica from streets that glistened in the sun, playgrounds peopled by boulders that seemed made of silver and gold, rocks on the beach with layers you could peel open like pages in a book. A Mineralogy curator named Peter told me mineral samples of Mica are sometimes termed “books.” My mother remembers finding books of Mica in the alley next to the building where she grew up in Brooklyn. Edgar Allan Poe lived across from Riverside Park when he is rumored to have written *The Raven*. If you find a shimmering stone in the area and leave it on the granite plaque on West 83rd street, your book of Mica becomes part of a memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. I imagine all these volumes together. A library composed of only rocks and minerals, every layer another narrative.

There is a cabinet in the stores of the American Museum of Natural History filled with minerals from New York. In it, I saw: Garnetiferous Gneiss found 150 feet below the street where I grew up; Green Muscovite located a few blocks from where our teacher lost us while we were hunting for worms; Galena Crystals from near Mount Sinai, where my father died high above 100th Street. Personal mineral memories.

The idea of minerals formed below the streets of New York seems somehow unlikely. That anything of the natural world, of caves and volcanoes, could ever occur there. But, it does.

The Subway Garnet, in the garment district where my mother worked; Almandine cousins from Lincoln Center; weathered gems from Grant’s Tomb; Black Tourmaline from Amsterdam Avenue; Bornite from the Bridal Path; Menaccanite from underneath El Museo Del Barrio; Microcline Crystal from White Plains; ice blue Chrysotile from Staten Island, listed as “location unknown,” though most likely it came from the Asbestos quarry at Ward’s Hill only just across the island from Snug Harbor, the first home for sailors too tired to return to sea.

A sparkling arterial system that connects one island to another. Under bodies of water; rivers of Stilbite, tunnels of steam. Resplendent mineral residents. New growth in older rock. A daily core sample of the city.

The rocks in Central Park are not smooth from years of kids sliding down them, like the polished fingertips and toes of certain statues, but from the slow movement of glaciers heaving themselves along, leaving a fine grain surface 18,000 years ago. Manhattan Schist forever tilting to the south. Imagine the Flatiron Building as Half Dome. Our hands enact the geological process.

And I know, we are humans, we are bones and muscle and brains and blood, but the iron in the Subway Garnet is the same iron that is in my body, and the marble floor of the Metropolitan is as carbonate as my bones. We are also mineral residents.

There is a photograph taken in 1942 on 207th Street in Inwood towards the northern tip of Manhattan on one of the only exposures of naturally occurring marble in New York City. It was taken during a field session with the Pick and Hammer Club, a mineral collecting club for young adults run by the Brooklyn Children's Museum in Crown Heights. My parents grew up in the neighborhood down Eastern Parkway; drawing in Saturday morning classes with Ms. Randall and planting seeds in the Botanic Garden.

At home, I have a Subway Garnet found in the jetties of Far Rockaway by an early member of the Pick and Hammer Club. My great grandmother worked in a house off the boardwalk. The Pick and Hammer Club wound down by the mid 1950s. My mother was just a teenager then. This was many years before the hurricane washed the garnets away.