



Topographies

By Stephen Benz

A Study Guide for Students

Synopsis

A wild ride on the madcap streets of Guatemala City. A twilight walk through old Havana with a Cuban mailman. A canoe trip in search of a lost grave in the Everglades. These are some of the experiences Stephen Benz describes in *Topographies*, an insightful and evocative collection of personal essays.

Reasons to Include This Book in the Classroom?

Topographies offers readers a view into unknown cultures across the globe and in their own backyards. It explores cultures, while also exploring ideas of freedom from American and foreign perspectives. In many cases, these essays address the question: What composes a national identity?

Author Bio

Along with two books of travel essays- *Guatemalan Journey* (University of Texas Press) and *Green Dreams: Travels in Central America* (Lonely Planet)-Stephen Benz has published essays in *Creative Nonfiction*, *River Teeth*, *TriQuarterly*, and other journals. Two of his essays have been selected for *Best American Travel Writing* (2003, 2015). Formerly a writer for *Tropic*, the Sunday magazine of the *Miami Herald*, he now teaches professional writing at the University of New Mexico.

Study Questions

Part 1: The United States

1. What do these stories tell us about how humans treat each other and the world?
2. Pick five (5) stories and explore what they suggest about the human condition.
3. Discuss the effects of simulation and simulacra on the American West. Where else have the ideas of simulation and simulacra warped reality? How?
4. Discuss the effects that American capitalism has on society and on the environment. Are these effects good or bad, in your opinion? In the author's opinion? Why or why not? What can we do to help make our practices less harmful?
5. How do you believe hyper-reality changes our perception of the world around us?
6. Anemoia is defined as nostalgia for a time you've never known. Discuss the idea of anemoia surrounding the old West.
7. After attempting to sleep in a high school football field, Benz is told he has to leave because "the law is the law" and remarks that he is now free again to roam, commenting on the idea of freedom. Discuss American perceptions of freedom and what is really free.

Writing Prompt: Write a short narrative about something for which you are nostalgic. Think of Benz's quote from Baudrillard, "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning."

Part 2: Eastern Europe

1. Compare and contrast the author's experiences traveling across the U.S. and across Europe. Discuss European and American ideas that "west is best".

2. Reflect on communism and the fall of the Soviet Union and its effects on people and nations as presented in this part of the book. Discuss the effects of Moldova's newfound independence on its citizens and on the country as a whole.

3. Benz writes, "If Francis Fukuyama was right in declaring a capitalist paradise as the end of history, then places like Moldova should be progressing toward prosperity and engaging in the pursuit of happiness. Such, however, did not appear to be the case." Consider why Fukuyama may believe a "capitalist paradise" will end history, and why that may not work in countries such as Moldova.

4. Choose five (5) locations in the book and discuss their similarities and differences, physically and economically. Make sure to include locations in other countries as well as locations throughout one country (i.e. Wyoming and Kishinev; Transnistria and Florida).

5. "For hours on end they stood in the cold, merchandise-laden arms outstretched—a position that looked like either torture or rehearsal for capitalist martyrdom—patiently awaiting some passerby to stop and haggle." Discuss the imagery offered in this quote. Compare the meaning of this quote to the following quote: "People could go without milk, butter, eggs, even bread—but not flowers." What do these quotes together suggest about the Moldovan people?

6. What does Moldova's neglect of its dark history say about the country's current state in the book? What does it say about humans?

7. Discuss the idea of terrorist hospitality. Have you ever experienced terrorist hospitality? How was it presented to you and how did you react?

Writing Prompt: The author describes Moldova's educational system and says young people are anxious to leave their homeland for better opportunities. Are such feelings limited to just Moldovans? Why? Why not?

Part 3: Latino Cultures

1. Discuss the author's perceptions of capitalism and communism as he sees them in the various places he's traveled, particularly in Moldova, Greece, the United States, and Cuba.

2. What do you believe travel symbolizes to the author? What does travel mean to you? Point to several passages where you can see the author's particular connection to travel, and point to a passage that represents your connection to travel as well.

3. What aspects of life connect cultures throughout the world? Point to some specific example in the text.

4. Discuss the role of religion in Eastern European culture, Hispanic culture, and United States culture.

5. Compare and contrast American ideals of freedom to ideals of freedom in Guatemala, Mexico, Cuba, and Moldova.

6. Compare and contrast the economic state of each country the author travels to in this book. What country do you think is happiest with its situation? Why?

7. Select an essay and examine how diction (word choice) indicates the writer's tone or attitude toward the subject under discussion.

Writing Prompt: The author visited many of these places decades ago. Pick one place in the book and research its current state. Report on its current state in a two-page essay and answer the question, "Would you visit this country now? Would you have visited then?"

Writing Prompt: Explain how Benz employs irony in at least two of the essays in the collection. How can the reader tell the writer is being ironic? What purpose does irony serve in these examples?

Learning Standards

Standards for the English Language Arts
(Compiled by NCTE and IRA)

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

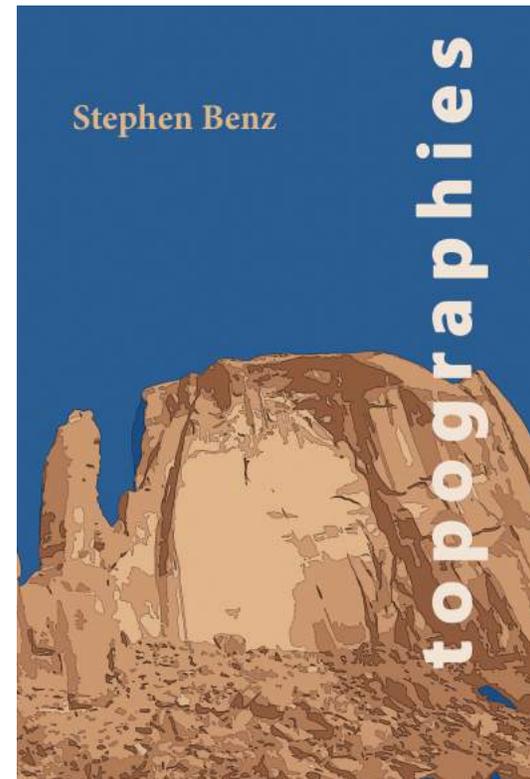
4. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

5. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

6. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

7. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

8. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).



etruscan press

84 West South Street
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766

P: 570.408.4546

www.etruscanpress.org
books@etruscanpress.org