

Maciej Smółka

Say Yes! to

Michigan

Image of the State of
Michigan And Its Construction
In Sufjan Stevens's Album "Michigan"



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Dedicated to:

Moira, Korey, Tyce, Holden, Marlee, Kayla, Katherine, Ryan, Nicole,
Irina, Anna, Scott, James, Nick, Tyler, Mari, Jesús, Tomasz, prof. Pacyga,
prof. Kaliss, Dickinson College staff, and every person I met during my stay
in the US who inspired my research.

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TABLE OF CONTENT

Introduction	7
PART I – ALL GOOD NAYSAYERS, SPEAK UP!: INTRODUCTION TO SUFJAN STEVENS’S <i>MICHIGAN</i>	
1. Chapter One: Theoretical Introduction	12
1.1. Local History and Its Significance	12
1.2. Cultural Texts and Local History	15
1.3. Perception of Place Through the Lenses of Cultural Texts	16
1.3.1. Examples	18
1.3.2. Their Influence on Culture and Society	22
1.4. Local History, Folklore, Microhistory, and Image of Places in Cultural Texts	23
2. Chapter Two: Background of <i>Michigan LP</i>	25
2.1. Sufjan Stevens	25
2.2. <i>The Fifty States Project</i>	28
2.3. Uniqueness of <i>Michigan</i> Album	30
PART II – SAY YES! TO MICHIGAN: SUFJAN STEVENS – <i>MICHIGAN</i>	
3. Chapter Three: Visual Design	34
3.1. Visual Design’s Structure	35
3.2. Visual Design’s Analysis	36
3.2.1. The Role of Visual Design	37
3.2.2. Analysis and Historical Importance of Graphic Content	40
3.2.3. Initial Image Construction	49
4. Chapter Four: Texts	51
4.1. Texts’ Structure	52
4.1.1. Packaging and Vinyl Discs	52
4.1.2. Lyrics	52
4.2. Texts’ Analysis	53
4.2.1. Packaging and Vinyl Discs	54
4.2.2. Lyrics	60
4.3. The Most Frequently Used Themes	73
4.3.1. Theme of History and Reality	74
4.3.2. Theme of Nature	77
4.3.3. Theme of Social Issues and Politics	78
4.3.4. Theme of Personal Reflections	81
4.3.5. Theme of Religion	83

4.4. Title-lyrics Relations	84
4.5. Usage of Symbolism and Allusions to the State of Michigan	86
5. Chapter Five: Music	89
5.1. Musical Structure	91
5.2. Analysis of Music	93
5.3. Role of Music in Perception of Album	99
5.3.1. General Stylistic and Setting the Mood	100
5.3.2. Highlighting Lyrics	103
5.3.3. References to the State of Michigan	104
PART III – REBUILD! RESTORE! RECONSIDER!:	
IMAGE OF THE STATE OF MICHIGAN AND ITS CONSTRUCTION	
6. Chapter Six: Analysis of <i>Michigan LP</i>	108
6.1. Correspondence Between the Three Layers of <i>Michigan</i> Album	111
6.2. Image of the State of Michigan	112
6.2.1. Author’s Perspective	115
6.2.2. Image and Implied Reality	116
6.3. Process of the Construction of the State of Michigan’s Image	117
6.3.1. Role of Symbolism, Nostalgia, and Patriotism	119
6.3.2. Role of Local History	121
6.3.2.1. Main Themes	122
6.3.2.2. Omitted Themes	123
7. Chapter Seven: Interpretation of <i>Michigan</i>	127
7.1. The Degree of Imposing Interpretation	128
7.2. Possible Interpretations of <i>Michigan LP</i>	129
7.2.1. Autobiography	131
7.2.2. Documentary	132
7.2.3. Artistic Vision	134
7.2.4. State’s Promotion	135
7.2.5. Homage	136
7.3. <i>Michigan</i> as Local History, Folklore, Microhistory	138
8. Conclusion	142
9. Bibliography	146
9.1. Primary Sources	146
9.2. Secondary Sources	146
9.2.1. Books	146
9.2.2. Online Sources	147
9.2.3. Journals, Magazines, and Newspapers	153
9.2.4. Other	153

INTRODUCTION

Michigan is a beautiful and fascinating state. This is practically proven by hundreds of scholars who devoted their academic research to the region in question. One of them – a prominent and renowned professor Willis F. Dunbar, who specializes in Michigan history, wrote in the preface to his famous textbook *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State* that “Michigan is perhaps the least typical of all the original forty-eight states in the Union.” He also wrote about its extraordinary geography, diverse climate, fascinating history, and political scene.¹

The importance and great significance of the Great Lake State cannot be overrated. With Detroit being once a center of country-wide automobile industry, it played crucial role in constructing American society and shaping it to what it is today. But Motor City is not the only fascinating aspect of this state. The university in Ann Arbor, as well as the rich and stunningly beautiful nature in the Upper Peninsula, lumber industry, instrumental in early American economy of Midwest, must be noted among others. One has to keep in mind that the state of Michigan also has a great tradition of its local cultures, including Yoopers, music scenes, popular sport clubs such as Detroit Tigers or Detroit Red Wings, progressive schools of thought with Henry Ford’s being the most popular one, making this region one of a kind. Because of that, one may conclude that Michigan has a rich potential to be studied, researched and known better.

However, the Wolverine State’s likeliness to be source of academic knowledge is not limited only to acquiring pieces of information about solely its communities, behaviors, or history in general. Dunbar rightly drew attention to one more aspect concerning Michigan and its importance in this context. He wrote that when one looks at this tradition of local structure – a state, one can see what the United States truly are – “This interest [in local history] perhaps reflects a comprehension that here are the grass roots of our history as a nation.”² From analyzing a single, smaller piece of a bigger whole, a person is able to understand processes, facts, or tendencies of a nation or country more fully. This is one of the reasons why methodology of microhistory or

1 W. F. Dunbar, G. S. May, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1995, p. x.

2 *Ibidem*, p. xi.

Introduction

folklore studies are used in historic analysis so often. A person can conclude from this way of thinking that the perception of each state as an individual part changes or reflects how one sees whole United States. With this framework in mind, one could think, for example, about the perception of those states which represent very characteristic, sometimes pop cultural images like Texas, New York, California, or even Wyoming. Nevertheless, Michigan with its diversity of all kinds, is also a great illustration of how the image can influence foreigner's or even American's view of this country. The key question in this issue is how one acknowledges this specificity and the characteristics of state, how he or she gets acquainted with its traditions, and how they become aware that New Mexico may be no less fascinating than New York, or North Dakota no less essential than North Carolina in the ways of society, culture, history etc.

People are not limited to history books, academic courses, documentary programs, or to simply visiting and sightseeing while trying to observe and possess knowledge about each state. Indirect and very subjective measures like movies, theater, fiction books, music albums and many more also play a great role in shaping one's image of city, region, state, or country. There are numerous examples that can back this statement – Sinatra's *New York, New York*, Kerouac's *Big Sur*, *Miami Vice* TV series, or even Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* movie, and countless more which made us – receivers of pop cultural content and people who are exposed to the effects of this stream of pieces of information – believe that each place is the same as depicted in these texts, or at least has some base in the reality of those regions. Michigan is no exception with its *Robocop* franchise, *Gran Torino*, or techno and Motown music, but there are only few that describe this state as a whole.

In 2003, a promising young star of American singer-songwriter scene – Sufjan Stevens – started his famous *The Fifty States Project* whose objective was to record an album about each state of the USA. Few years later it all turned out to be just a marketing gimmick to attract audience, but nevertheless he managed to record two LPs about his two favorite states – Michigan and Illinois. The first one, titled simply *Michigan*, but stylized as *Greetings from Michigan, The Great Lake State* was released in 2003 to great critical acclaim. Each song was a homage to his beloved home state, telling stories about places, people, cities, natural sites, and many other characteristic features that he associated with his homeland.

Introduction

In 15 songs on CD and 20 on the vinyl version Stevens constructed the image of Michigan from the view of a person who was born there, grew up there, migrated to New York City and presumably was sentimental about the region of his childhood. *Michigan* album is a very interesting text that lets one study the way in which its author constructs the image of homeland, deconstructs the stereotypes, and publicizes some regional issues, but at the same time promotes it through music. It is a complex reflection about the state in which Michigan was, is, and where it is still heading, or should be heading. Stevens juggles states symbols, uses them to build the place that he knows, or once knew. It has to be mentioned that the title of the album, stylized as a postcard, suggests that this is no solely artistic vision, but a reality in a form of music, lyrics, and visual design.

This album can answer multiple questions about how one can perceive homeland, but not only. *Michigan* LP is also the key to understanding how music can create an image of a state and be used not only as artistic achievement, but also as a mean of subconscious image building and promotion thereof. Stevens, who attended a master's program for writers, has the ability to pay distinctive tribute to Michigan with his sublime lyrics and multi-layered music that reflects sentiments of the state's landscape. But *Michigan* is not merely music; it is also the art on the album covers, inlays, and on the discs containing the music. They are packed with symbols, texts, paintings, even maps that help listener to get acquainted with the state that all compositions are about. Therefore, Stevens's LP must be treated not as a music album, but as a complex and deliberate commentary of Michigan's reality with the sophistication of an art form, which is attractive to potential consumers exposed to its image-building feature.

In this form, *Michigan* is one of the very few of its kind, and has to be considered as extraordinary in the history of music paying homage to a state or a region. Multiple references to local history make this aspect of the album essential to understanding the music fully. By analyzing the LP's content in context of state's history, symbolism, nature, culture, and general landscape, one might come to conclusions about how Michigan may be viewed by people who listened to Stevens's music, but also how this image is built by a person whose homeland is Michigan, and what are the differences between those two perceptions. The attempt to decode *Michigan's* meaning and role, and the attempt to interpret it in the context of building the image of the state may lead

Introduction

to specific conclusions about Michigan and of the whole United States. Just like cultural texts are packed with pieces of information about societies and their behaviors, which may or may not be true, but are presented in such fashion that may suggest their truthfulness, *Michigan* plays a role of a transmitter of such pieces of information that are very specific and may be influential in the process of creating the image of Michigan in one's consciousness.

All of these will lead to forming a thesis of this work, which concerns much broader topic than one artist, one album, or one state. Stevens, by devoting his LP to his home state, has decided to depict it in a very distinct way, by using elements of local culture, symbolism, even folklore, and the outcome can be seen in each composition. Through researching every element of an album as a whole – its textual, musical, and visual layers – an academic is exposed to a very specific image with backgrounds in the state's past, artist's biography, and pop culture. By using the context of local history, with minor addition of folklore studies and microhistory, one may find out that telling stories about one particular place can not only describe the nation as a whole, but also create an assumption of what a nation is.

Concluding from that, Sufjan Stevens's role in creation of culture is undeniable not only in the terms of recording an album – work of art and element of culture – but also in a more sociological approach. His personalized version of Michigan is influential in the general perception of the album, which makes *Michigan* impossible to be seen as objective, just like every other cultural text, despite being stylized as a piece that suggests trustworthiness. The album, packed with personal messages and connotations to his biography, as well as containing themes such as religion, or the idea of a community, may have been used only to convey message about the general sentiments of both Michigan and Stevens's personal idea of Michigan.

Just like Willis F. Dunbar wrote in *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State* that analysis of one state can lead to conclusions about whole Union, one may assume that research of *Michigan* LP in context of local history may give academics ideas about how popular culture can create an image of a place in general, by using common themes, reconstructing them within the framework of local sentiments, and putting them out in a form of an artistic achievement.

PART I

All Good Naysayers, Speak Up!: Introduction to Sufjan Stevens's *Michigan*

“All good thoughts is not the act of doing
What we want, but what we should improving
Properties, ideas, a woman's pleasure
Is empowered by love, a perfect measure!”³

3 S. Stevens, *All Good Naysayers, Speak Up! Or Forever Hold Your Peace* [in:] *Michigan*, Asthmatic Kitty, 2003.

1. Chapter One: Theoretical Introduction

The key to understanding the concept behind Sufjan Stevens's *Michigan*, the author's ideas, the ways he achieves his goals, and, most of all, the possible methods of understanding why he decided to record such an album is to examine the nature and importance of local history. The whole LP's idea is constructed on the base assumptions of this branch of social science. It does not only speak as an ambassador of Michigan, or its communities, but also show trends in manners of reporting on history and telling it.

The central aspect of this particular analysis is how one can perceive local history through the lenses of cultural texts, how it can influence one's view of place, and what it says about an author of such a text – his perspective, attitude, and background. *Michigan* is one of very few albums devoted in its entirety to one state, with every song speaking about its history, culture, and society, making it interesting not only to research on the state of Michigan, or Sufjan Stevens, but also the specificity of American society and United States itself.

Before analyzing in detail the album's visual design, lyrics, music, and general concept, one must get to know the theoretical frames within which the research will take place. This will shed light on the process of perceiving the content of the LP and its proper interpretation. For this purpose, it is necessary to cite authors and works that can be helpful in understanding *Michigan* and its significance in American music, society, and history.

1.1. Local History and Its Significance

One may consider the starting point of my research to be a small paragraph from the preface of Willis F. Dunbar's and George S. May's *Michigan: A History of The Wolverine State* book. Dunbar writes that Michigan has a great tradition of interest in state and local history, especially since the Second World War. But what is even more important, he emphasizes that paying attention to "our communities, neighborhoods, and states" can tell all the concerned ones a lot about the whole country. As it was said before, he writes that "this interest perhaps reflects a comprehension that here are the grass roots of our history as a nation." Dunbar also says that "the kind of people we are, our outlook on life, our ways of doing things, and our faults and foibles as well as our strengths can best be understood by carefully examining our cities, our rural

areas, and our states.” However, the most important sentence in this crucial paragraph is what follows: “local history is important, and it is in this sense that this history of Michigan is presented – to further an understanding of a nation’s history through a study of one of its major components.” This shows that when one studies a smaller portion of a whole, it can reveal bigger trends, methods, or specificities of particular thoughts. Also, it shows one of the main purposes of all local history – to understand a nation through understanding and knowing its small portion. This is the reason why local history can be considered as the base of history research.⁴

The same conclusion can be seen in the work of David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty titled *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*. They not only write that “an understanding of national and even international history benefits from increased knowledge of nearby past,” giving examples of American Revolution, World War II, and Iraq War, but they also pay attention to the fact that one cannot comprehend a nation’s history only by looking at its leadership elites, their decisions, or even at the big processes alone. They all had their roots in particular people, local events, communities, towns, cities, or even states.⁵

Another example of local history’s importance is given by Carol Kammen in her book *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What It Means* where in introduction she writes on various interpretations of the term “local history”. She mentions, among others, that one can understand it in such fashion: “despite its limited geographical focus, a broad field of inquiry: it is the political, social, and economic history of a community [...]”, and also as a “place to hear women’s voices, find information about child-rearing practices, ask questions related to education, leisure, and privacy.” This shows how much one can learn only by doing research about small community, and how many conclusions one may think of while doing so.⁶

Significantly, Kammen points out that in many cases the local history is created by amateurs, enthusiasts, a person who “loves history, both the past

4 W. F. Dunbar, G. S. May, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

5 D. E. Kyvig, M. A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers 2010, p. 7-9.

6 C. Kammen, *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What it Means*, Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History 1988, p. 4-5.

itself and the study of the past.” This does not depreciate the value of one’s work, or research, only exemplifies that many may consider their work as not as professional. She adds that this attitude is widely criticized, even by the authorities in the field, and cannot be taken seriously. D.G. Edwards wrote in *The Local Historian* periodical that the only difference between amateur and professional local historians is their main career path. Both can be considered “amateurs” if their research is not competent, and “professional” when they are “critical, analytical, and imaginative [...]”⁷

In addition, Kammen, very briefly, pays attention to the distinction between local history and folklore studies, which can be found critical in this work’s research. She writes that both fields of research are sometimes mistaken for each other, and that “the tools and the products of folklore and folk-life studies [...] can illuminate the story of local history.”⁸ Moreover, Richard Dorson, a famous folklorist, states that local history is “naturally and inescapably linked with the study of folklore,” and that it gives “the opportunity to record folk tradition [...]”⁹ In this context one could inquire about the nature of *Michigan LP* – can it be considered as a local history itself, or example of folklore, that can be analyzed via lenses of local history.

On the other hand, one has to take into consideration that *Michigan* can be treated not only as local history piece, but also or exclusively as a “local reality” work. It has to be analyzed in both ways, so that it can be fully understood. If it is in fact a more reality-driven than a history focused album, it can be considered as a document, based on personal experience and local history. This situation would force its researcher to treat *Michigan* as a folkloristic work of art. But, as one would discover in subsequent chapters, the definition of this album’s characteristics can’t be categorized this easily. What’s more, this piece can be also treated as, for the lack of a better term – a genre cross-over, drawing elements specific for both, making it even more interesting for scholars, in any of these fields of research. For the purposes of this work, it will be assumed that Stevens’s work is an effect of local history rather than folklore - an attempt to prove it as such will be made in consecutive chapters - but the option of it being the other will be taken into account throughout this work.

7 Ibidem, p. 2-4.

8 Ibidem, p. 5.

9 D. E. Kyvig, M. A. Marty, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

These examples show how rich the field of local history research can be; how many conclusions, observations, and reflections can be caused using its methodology and greater idea, which is to learn about something bigger by understanding smaller part of it. In general, this resembles the concept behind Sufjan Stevens's *The Fifty States Project*. By paying homage to states, he gave researchers a source to analyze its meaning, purpose, and results.

1.2. Cultural Texts and Local History

Sufjan Stevens's work is in fact much more interesting than just its context of local history. As any other cultural text, it influences the way in which its recipient perceives a place, the region depicted by images, music, lyrics, and other forms of expression. This showcases the other great issue that has to be addressed prior to proper analysis – the role of cultural texts in depicting places, and influencing recipient's vision. However, the issue is far bigger, and forces a reflection on the influence of authors work on consumers' world view.

The fact that every cultural text is far from being objective cannot be disputed. Every author's background, ideology, faith, political views, social environment, family life etc. – literary every aspect of one's life - may or may not be reflected in their work. Nevertheless, the chance of being so is extremely high, if not certain.¹⁰ There are countless examples of such behavior, even when a work is trying to keep up appearances of being objective, such as documentary films. Works by Michael Moore, or Dinesh D'Souza can illustrate this idea of non-objective documentaries.¹¹

This kind of artistic visions not only manifest world views of the directors, musicians, writers, painters, architects, etc., but also give the potential of adapting their ideologies by people to whom those works are addressed, and by whom are perceived. This, in turn, raises questions about intentions of those authors, the ways of projecting their ideas (consciously or unconsciously), and the effects of those processes.

Once again, Carol Kammen writes that if a local historian wants to get the real picture of particular situation, every information has to be verified because of potential bias in terms of ideology, perspective, or just lack of important

¹⁰ D. E. Kyvig, M. A. Marty, *op. cit.*, p. 61. C. Kammen, *op. cit.*, p. 49-50.

¹¹ B. Berkowitz, *Are Conservative Documentary Films on the Rise?*, AlterNet, <http://www.alternet.org/media/are-conservative-documentary-films-rise> (20.05.2015).

pieces of information. Moreover, she writes that there are four ways to know if one had acquired correct and full data – “The first is through research, the second is general knowledge [...], and the third is contemporary knowledge or judgment about the place [...] and about human nature. The fourth ingredient in the process of knowing is a responsive imagination about the past.”¹²

While analyzing cultural texts in the context of local history, the ways of depicting it and showing it to consumers, a researcher is forced to abandon most of those rules in order to focus on what the author had in mind while working on the specific work. That means that the first and fourth rule are the key to proper analysis, with the addition of context in which a cultural text was created – author’s biography, potential consumers, the historical period in which it was created, etc. One has to have in mind that analyzing cultural texts through local history lenses is not ordinary historical research, and it requires a scholar to focus more on the context than on the studied piece. Nevertheless, detailed analysis of content itself unveils its meaning, which is truly complete only with the general background that accompanies it.

Keeping this in mind, both the potential bias of authors and the specific parts of works that one has to search for and analyze, it has to be mentioned that a critical attitude towards these cultural texts must be maintained. This differs significantly from typical local history attitude – researcher has to approach these texts first as artistic visions, and only subsequently as historical, or folklore, data.

1.3. Perception of Place Through the Lenses of Cultural Texts

A distinct amount of cultural texts can influence not only overall world vision, but also a view on a particular part of reality. Most of interest in the context of this paper, is the impact that cultural texts have of constructing the image of place – community, town, city, or state.

When one thinks of works of literature or films, most of them are set in a specific place, some reality in which the action takes place, playing role of a background, or even a character. Paintings and architecture also can show artists’ vision about region, city, and landscape. In terms of music, location can play a distinct role as well – songs, just like in case of poetry, literature, and every other piece of art, can tell story of places, people living in different

¹² C. Kammen, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

settings, events that occur there etc. What is even more important and interesting is how these locations are depicted, why people draws images in particular fashion, what tools does an artist use to achieve the goal, what stylistics are used, how it influences the strength of the work's message, and recipient's idea of this place.

These cultural texts can be analyzed in any of the ways depicted above, and in countless more. The most important thing is to notice the characteristics of these distinct places and the role that they play in constituting what work of art represents, and how they influence its overall outcome. For example, one may think of the general outcome of *Scarface* (1983) if it wasn't placed in the sunny Miami, Florida, or if *Breaking Bad* TV series weren't located in the hot Albuquerque, New Mexico, or if *The Dark Knight's* (2008) plot took place in Los Angeles... These would have been radically different works, with different cultural contexts, and different characteristics.

Beyond that, it is very important to not only be aware of locations in which cultural texts are placed, but primarily of the role they play, especially in perspective that is the main topic of that work – image of place and construction of that image. Local history, which focuses on characteristics of a particular place and time is very important and extremely helpful in defining the meaning of such works. This approach can show how authors of such works want consumers to see the locations in which they are placed – what are the most important things that differentiate such places from others, what is their purpose, and do they tell something about the overall environment and background.

Judging from this line of thinking, one may consider these films, books, albums, paintings, etc., to have the role of reporting about local history. By showing some settings, emphasizing some details and characteristics on locations, but also highlighting events, important figures, or landmarks, they not only tell the story of protagonists, but also the history of places in which they are set.

On the other hand, cultural texts tend not only to report local history to their consumers, but also to create one. By selecting specific elements of local reality, they tend to construct an image of place. In this case it is important to focus on all parts of native characteristics, both depicted and omitted. The overall picture will tell a number of things about the author's attitude and place itself. In fact, by artist's selection of specific motifs concerning location,

one can speak of defining the nature of these settings, or redefining them. It has to be kept in mind that dramatic license, variation of *licentia poetica*, allows author to alter reality to his or her vision. That means that even when watching documentary, or even more so docudramas, we should know that the author does not provide scientific pieces of information, but often only their ideologized version.¹³ This can also be applied to forms other than documentary films, but also to other art, especially those who do not even pretend to have objective values. In these, cities, communities, states can be depicted as over-criminalized, more scenic, poorer, richer etc.

Concluding from this, every work of art is characterized by a certain level of its author's own background, which indisputably influences the work itself. When it comes to local history, it can be created, defined, or even redefined by those processes. It is even more significant when the consumer has no personal experience with such location or other resource to compare this image depicted by the main text. One could imagine what would be the image of Great Britain in the mind of a foreigner who thinks only of the late-70s punk scene, or what would some person think of Africa, basing his or her view exclusively on *The Lion King* (1994).

1.3.1. Examples

Cultural significance of such processes is of extremely great value. It not only influences recipients' view of a given place, but can also promote, pay respect, criticize, define/redefine, and write/rewrite its history, which may have great consequences for perception of that place by both visitors and natives.

As Carol Kammen writes, these artistic measures also influence scholarship itself. She writes of example of 1970s television miniseries *Roots*. It is claimed that it has been a "potent factor in the revival of interest in local history." Moreover "the importance of *Roots* is that it democratized genealogy in areas where such study had been perceived as elitist and reinforced the trend established by *Foxfire* and the preservation movement." It means that this TV series could play role in redefining not only what one thought of slavery, reality of slaves' lives, or this period of time, but also about South and its image back then. It is only one of many examples that can be considered extremely important in

13 B. D'sa, "Social Studies in the Dark: Using Docudramas to Teach History" [in:] *Social Studies*, vol. 96, Issue 1 (Jan/Feb 2005), p. 9-10.

understanding how the past as well as the present are constructed by cultural texts.

Of course when thinking about other examples of constructing image of American South, the first title that comes to mind is *Gone With the Wind*. Both book and film are credited for making the whole nation interested in phenomenon of this region, but not only. Karen L. Cox in *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* writes that “the film version of Mitchell’s Civil War epic cemented a nostalgic image of the South in American popular culture that still resonates with the American public. In the book and most certainly in the film, the cultural mythology of the Old South was in full flower.” These cultural texts make its viewers think of this part of America as beautiful, sentimental, and of times as better ones, when everything was simpler and more attractive. This image remained stable for almost three decades, when in late 1950’s television coverage of Civil Rights Movement revealed that the “image of the South [...] was far more complicated.”¹⁴

These two examples show that analyzing how images of places are constructed has academic potential, which has been exploited before. But also it is important to acknowledge that this process takes place during every encounter with a cultural text, not only with those considered influential, or worth academic analysis. Having that in mind is essential in understanding the reasons for researching such texts as *Michigan LP*. There is no necessity for detailed analysis of any of those cultural texts. Although, presentation of the potential that lays within cultural texts’ research may be vital in process of understanding Sufjan Stevens’s music albums.

Continuing the topic of films and TV series, one could think of numerous examples of such image construction as depicted above. As mentioned before, *Scarface* from 1983 can be considered as a very vivid illustration of cultural text being a transmitter of specific image of place. Hot and sunny Miami with beautiful women, sandy beaches, as well as the harsh reality of immigrants and a carefree life of the wealthy (who earn their money mainly through crime) makes a particular impression on the viewer. Regardless of being faithful or not to reality, it undisputedly places Florida’s municipality in a precise setting that plays a role in movie. When analyzed isolated from the

¹⁴ K. L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press 2011, p. 81-82.

main plot, Miami itself can be seen as extremely attractive (or opposite) for the audience – in either way it acts as an important factor within. *Taxi Driver* (1976) is a very similar example of a city, in this case New York City, playing important role in the film. As the main character says: “[...] this city here is like an open sewer, you know, it’s full of filth and scum.” It is clear that this American metropolis is depicted as unfriendly, dirty, and dangerous. Reasons of creating such image can be put into question, their relation with reality etc., which in case of NYC were mainly based on its radically poor condition in that decade.¹⁵ Other interesting examples of image constructing can be found in such movies as *Into the Wild* (2007) where not only cities, but wild Alaskan landscapes, Great Canyon, American Mid-West and many others are depicted in very specific ways; or *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) with its hyper-realism of American suburbs, and countless more.

One can encounter analogical situation when watching popular TV series. Just like in the case of *Roots*, there are numerous other television programs that can teach their viewers a lot about local reality, or reality that the creators want to show. Similar case to *Scarface* is posed by *Miami Vice*, which presents a simplified and exaggerated image of criminals, police department, and, significantly – Miami which is reflected in every activity (people, their attitude, fashion, music etc.) within each episode. Other examples that come to mind includes *Twin Peaks* with its rainy, lumber industry-driven, mysterious Washington State, *The Walking Dead* and the state of Georgia with its unfriendly climate and conservative society, *Nashville* with eponymous city being focused on music industry only, which can be seen in every facet of life, or first season of *True Detective* and Louisiana based in the southern gothic style, etc.

Movies and TV series are the ones that are first to be analysed in context of depicting the image of place, but there are various other cultural texts that must be included in order to fully see this process. Literature and art can also be considered to fit in this trend. One also cannot exclude video games, which had a great influence on culture in last decades. Three most representative examples of those include: *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, which is loosely based on *Scarface* film, took place in Vice City that resembles Miami, with the same characteristics of the abovementioned movie; *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*

15 R. Zecker, *Metropolis: the American city in popular culture*, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers 2008., p. 144-145.

and its main city (San Andreas) being based on Los Angeles from the early 1990's prior to Rodney King Riots – its main focus is crime and gang wars, within the scenic areas of California; and first two parts of the *Max Payne* game series, which are located in New York City, depicted as a filthy, corrupted, hostile, extremely cold, and noir-style metropolis.

However, music does not operate using images literary, but, just like literature, depicts these pictures using words, and, additionally, sounds. In this case it mostly resembles poetry, and could be analyzed as such when thinking about constructing images of places, keeping in mind the sounds layer. Furthermore, when one takes into consideration singles, EPs, LPs, sheet music, or any other “packages” of released music, its visual side can also be researched. Just like in movies, TV series, video games, literature, and other cultural texts, there are numerous examples of constructing images of places.

First of all, one can find specific characteristics of this process in different musical styles. For instance, heartland rock usually tells stories about the blue-collar America, industrial areas with hard working citizens in mostly lower-middle class communities; west coast rap emphasizes mostly life of gang members in California and how the environment around them influences their actions; main topics of early 20th century delta blues were life of African-Americans in rural area of the Mississippi Delta etc. It is important to notice the local music scenes and “city sounds” like Chicago blues, Philadelphia soul, Minneapolis Sound, Denver Sound etc., which often focuses on issues that are vital to native communities. There are also, of course, great quantities of single songs that depict some places – *New York, New York* by Frank Sinatra, *Chicago* by Tom Waits, *Montana* by Frank Zappa, *Viva Las Vegas* by Elvis Presley, *California Girls* by The Beach Boys, *No Sleep Till Brooklyn* by Beastie Boys, *Sweet Home Alabama* by Lynyrd Skynyrd, or *Georgia On My Mind* by Ray Charles, just to name a few.

But when it comes to whole albums emphasizing particular places, these are much more difficult to find. Not as many artists decide to devote whole LPs to their hometowns, home states, or their communities. Obviously, there were several examples of those like *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ*, or *Nebraska* by Bruce Springsteen, whose big part of career is centered on New Jersey; *Straight Outta Compton* by NWA about their views on the reality of living in Compton, California; *Californication* by Red Hot Chili Peppers and *Hotel California* by the Eagles being homages to the state of California; *Songs for the Deaf* considered to

be concept album about driving through California's desert; or *Sonic Highways* by Foo Fighters telling 8 stories about 8 music scenes of different regions.

Michigan may not be considered as the most interesting topic of cultural texts, but actually there were many examples of these that could be explored to define its image within. Probably the most popular is the *RoboCop* franchise consisting of films (1987 movie was the prototype of all other variations), comic books, books, the cartoon series, the TV series, video games, and even songs. It took place in the future, dystopian version of Detroit, MI, full of greed, corruption, and anarchy that only a half-man half-machine police officer could overcome. *Gran Torino* (2008) is also a very important film in terms of the image of Michigan, especially Detroit, which is depicted as full of racial problems, hostile, dangerous, and depressing. Similar situation can be seen in *8 Mile* (2002) starring Detroit native rapper Eminem. One cannot forget also about movies like *Roger and Me* (1989), *Blue Collar* (1978), *Grosse Pointe Blank* (1997), or *Escabana in da Moonlight* (2001). Significant TV series that were set in Michigan include *Sister, Sister*, *Low Winter Sun*, *Freaks and Geeks* among others. When it comes to music, one can list such examples as Motown Records located in Detroit that released music created by natives and its Motown sound, which are now considered to be one of the most important local scenes in history of American music; local bands like MC5, The Stooges, or The White Stripes, as well as single songs, probably the most popular being *Detroit Rock City* by KISS. Overwhelming majority of all of those examples (*Escabana in da Moonlight* being the exception) focus on the Detroit metropolitan area, ignoring not only the rest of Lower Peninsula, but the whole Upper Peninsula of the Michigan state. In this context, *Michigan LP* is even more fascinating to explore, because of its direct emphasis of the whole state.

1.3.2. Their Influence on Culture and Society

All of the cultural texts mentioned above show an excerpt of possibilities of studying them in terms of image construction. They can reveal many pieces of information about its authors and places themselves. Moreover, they cannot only be treated as source for analysis, but also as factor that influences culture and society itself.

There are two cases that can represent the idea behind cultural texts' impact on peoples' view of the world. First of all, as mentioned before, *Gone With the Wind* had an enormous impact, not only in history of cinema, but also on the

society itself. Americans “readily consumed the film’s ideas about the southern past, the idealized race relations [...], and the image of the South as a place locked in time.” Phrases like “false impression of the South”, “grotesque”, “misconceptions”, “historical inaccuracies”, “stereotypes of southern blacks” are seen very often when content of this movie is described. This image has been adapted by audiences overwhelmingly, which caused American society to think of the 1930s South as the Old South of the 19th century. Keeping in mind that even before the premiere of *Gone With the Wind*, by 1938 “approximately 14 million people had read the novel in whole or in part”, one has to accept the enormous scale of the process of constructing this idealized, sentimental and nostalgic view of the Southern United States.¹⁶

Second one is the Detroit image in film, which seems to concern its communities, authorities, and even filmmakers themselves. Steve Inskeep researched this topic for National Public Radio in 2009, giving numerous examples of how this city is depicted on the big screen. Many major and very popular films that took place in Detroit made it look dangerous and hostile, a place where crime, urban decay, and race relations are overwhelming problems, people from working class are unappreciated, underpaid, and maltreated by employers. In some sense one can think that Detroit is an icon of the contradictions of the American power and decline. Those characteristics bring dozens of filmmakers to explore this topic, which only confirms this city’s specific image.¹⁷

These examples present the potential of cultural texts in constructing an image of cities, or even whole regions. With *Gone With the Wind* changing the perception of the South for decades and influencing generations of filmmakers, and motion pictures about Detroit confirming stereotypes about its unfriendliness, one must acknowledge the importance of every film, TV series, book, video game, or music album in making its consumers view the particular places in very specific ways, promoted by the author.

1.4. Local History, Folklore, Microhistory, and Image of Places in Cultural Texts

As explained before, cultural texts are a valuable source for analyzing them in terms of images of places. There are numerous ways to approach them in

¹⁶ K. L. Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 90, 95.

¹⁷ S. Inskeep, *Detroit’s Big Screen Image Problem*, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103415990> (20.06.2015).

order to acquire a full picture of locations that one wants to learn about. The answer which methodology/paradigm is best for analysis differs in regards to the source that one wants to explore. Local history would be the best approach to study cultural texts that use multiple history motifs concerning the place that they refer to; folklore studies, when they are characteristic for the native art and tell stories about local community from first-person perspective; microhistory would be the best one when focus is on one particular story that has potential to reflect the bigger image of society, city, region, state.

Of course, categorization of cultural texts, basing on such indications can be very problematical, because of their ambiguous character. There is no one answer to the question if local history is the best choice for analysis of *Gone With the Wind*, folklore studies for music of Delta blues genre, or microhistory for The Roots' *undun* LP, but these can be the basis for further investigation. Concluding from that, the most fortunate thing to do is to use each of those, in order to fully explore texts' meanings – that would give the complete image of the studied source. However, undisputable fact is that most of them are placed in particular location, which can be analyzed leading to learning a lot about these settings.

When it comes to *Michigan* LP, just like in most cases, there is no one answer for what is the best theoretical approach for researching the image of the state of Michigan and its construction. As it was mentioned before, the local history may be the best one, because of the presence of historical motifs within. On the other hand, microhistory is another valuable option, regarding the often autobiographical, or semi-autobiographical perspective in the song's lyrics. Folklore studies may seem the least likely to be used, considering that it was composed outside of Michigan, without any direct connections to folk music of the region, or local art.

Nevertheless, the ambiguous character of Sufjan Stevens's work makes it fascinating to research, in the context of the author's biography, discography, his ideas, perspective, Michigan's history, society, culture. And when one has in mind that *Michigan* album is one of the few in this kind, being fully committed not only to one particular aspect, but rather the whole state of Michigan, which has probably never happened before or since, makes it extremely vital in cultural studies, American history, folklore studies, local history studies, microhistory, Michigan studies, and, most importantly, American studies.

2. Chapter Two: Background of *Michigan* LP

In order to start analyzing *Michigan* LP – the main subject of this work – one has to learn the biography and motivations of the author. Stevens's life events have had a great impact on his songs, their themes, music, lyrics and general concept. His biography is especially important in the context of the *Michigan* album, as an album whose main theme is the state from which its author originates.

Research of the image of the Wolverine State, its construction, as well as properly understanding and interpreting the whole work requires acknowledging the background of the album and knowledge of the musician's life events that led to creating this work of art. In fact, just as explained in the previous chapter, an appropriate decoding of the messages included in this music album depends on the scholar's knowledge about the author and the general concept behind the LP and the projects that it is a part of.

This is the main reason why before a detailed analysis of each of album's elements, one has to acquire knowledge of who Sufjan Stevens is, why he decided to create *Michigan*, and what was the idea behind recording this LP.

2.1. Sufjan Stevens

Sufjan Stevens was born July 1st 1975 in Detroit, Michigan, USA. His parents were Carrie and Rasjid, but Stevens's mother left her children when he was one-year-old, leaving them with their father who raised them with stepmother Hadidjah. Both of them were members of Subud – a spiritual group.¹⁸ In 1980 Carrie married Lowell Brahms, and reunited with the family now consisting of Sufjan, his three elder siblings, one older step-sister, and a younger half-brother.¹⁹

Despite being brought up in a family this big, he had imaginary friends Peter the Ox, Dora the Talking Skeleton and Herb the Dietitian. This shows potential of his creativity that he was presenting since childhood. During his early years he went to Steiner school, but was pulled out, because he couldn't properly read or write at the age of nine. His teacher once described him not as being "dumb", but just "understimulated."²⁰ In an interview with *The Guard-*

18 S. Stevens, *Thomas Pletzinger by Sufjan Stevens*, BOMB Magazine, <http://bomb-magazine.org/article/4903/thomas-pletzinger> (27.01.2015).

19 A. Carew, *Sufjan Stevens – Artist Profile*, About.com, <http://altmusic.about.com/od/artists/a/sufjanstevens.htm> (27.01.2015).

20 Ibidem.

ian, he said that his upbringing was marked by a constant “brink of domestic and financial disaster, bankruptcy.” It was caused by his parents’ lack of good display in their efforts to make a better living.²¹

In 1984 Stevens’s family moved from Detroit suburbs to Petoskey in the northern part of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. One year later, after only five years of marriage, Carrie and Lowell divorced.²² When he was a teenager, Sufjan studied piano and oboe in the private Christian art-school in Northern Michigan – Interlochen. After going on school-mandated mission to Jamaica, he decided that he wanted to become a writer.²³ Stevens remembers that he loved reading in his teenager years, but in “technical, mechanical, schooled method.” He did not appreciate emotional layers of books, but their structural form.²⁴

Sufjan’s first step in higher education was at Hope College on the outskirts of Holland, Michigan. It was a small, liberal-arts college. His stepfather Lowell also moved there and introduced him at that time to the music of Nick Drake and Terry Riley. With that kind of inspiration, Sufjan started to learn to play guitar and eventually began to write his own songs.²⁵

During that time he played in the band called Marzuki,²⁶ but didn’t provide songs, deferring this role to Shannon Stephens. He was piano, guitar, percussion, and recorder player.²⁷ Other band members included cellist Jamie Kempers, and Matthew Haseltine, who is the brother of the Jars of Clay band’s Dan Haseltine.²⁸ Marzuki released two albums: *Marzuki* (MS Records, 1996), and *No One Likes a Nervous Wreck* (MS Records, 1998). During their career, they earned a pretty sizable Western Michigan fan base. In 1999 Marzuki disbanded.²⁹

The late 1990s were busy years for Stevens – he moved to New York City and attended the M.A. program for writers at the New School for Social Research, and what’s even more important, he decided to pursue a solo career, and start-

²¹ Ibidem.

²² R. Dombal, *True Myth: A Conversation With Sufjan Stevens*, Pitchfork.com, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/9595-true-myth-a-conversation-with-sufjan-stevens/> (18.05.2015).

²³ A. Carew, *op.cit.*

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Named after his brother.

²⁷ A. Carew, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Jurbanik, *Djohariah Stevens*, malleus&incus, <https://malleusincus.wordpress.com/2010/08/22/djohariah-stevens/> (27.01.2015).

²⁹ Ibidem.

ed a record company with his stepfather.³⁰ Asthmatic Kitty Records was created to promote local artists from Holland, Michigan, but eventually grew into a company based in Lander, WY, Indianapolis, IN, and New York City, NY.³¹

In 2000 he recorded his debut album *A Sun Came* via Asthmatic Kitty, composed to a great extent of folk songs with rather big arrangements. It wasn't a big success; he failed to enter the mainstream. The second LP – *Enjoy Your Rabbit* – was a turn to a radically different direction. He recorded an experimental, electronic, and instrumental album in which he explored a theme of Chinese Zodiac. Since the beginning of his solo career he made ambitious LPs with high concepts that did not reward him with great financial success despite critical acclaim. Stevens toured with The Danielson Famile (a Christian music group) and Half-Handed Cloud (a one man band). Today, they are credited for helping Stevens achieve his breakout works.³²

In 2003 he started *The Fifty States Project* (which will be explained later in details) with his third LP *Michigan*. Despite being another high concept, long, 15-song work, it was his first critically acclaimed album, which was able to make many critics' "Best of the Year" lists. *Seven Swans*, his fourth, was a spiritual and Christian-themed album that continued his characteristic folk style. It was produced by Danielson Famile's front man Daniel Smith. Smaller arrangements, strong religious motifs, and, again, the overall concept made *Seven Swans* an influential alternative LP. Stevens's next two albums focused on the state of Illinois: *Illinois* (2005) and *Avalanche: Outtakes & Extras from the Illinois Album* (2006).³³ At the end of the 2006 he also released a 5-disc collection of Christmas tunes entitled *Songs for Christmas*.³⁴

2007 was a very quiet year for Stevens. He started working on a project about the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, commissioned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music Multimedia, which was another concept album. It was presented for the first time in November of 2007. *The BQE* LP was released two years after, in 2009 along with a DVD film that accompanied this project. In 2009, the

³⁰ *Sufjan Stevens – Artist Site*, AsthmaticKitty.com, <http://asthmatickitty.com/artists/sufjan-stevens/> (27.01.2015).

³¹ *Asthmatic Kitty Records Info*, AsthmaticKitty.com, <http://asthmatickitty.com/info/> (27.01.2015).

³² A. Carew, *op. cit.*

³³ M. Mesquita Borges, *Sufjan Stevens – Artist Biography*, Allmusic.com, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/sufjan-stevens-mn0000580300/biography> (27.01.2015).

³⁴ A. Carew, *op. cit.*

rearranged for chamber-quartet version of *Enjoy Your Rabbit*, entitled *Run Rabbit Run* and performed by the Osso String Quartet, was also issued. This caused a decrease in interest of Stevens's work, because of a less accessible and much more experimental music. Sufjan Stevens since the beginning of his career worked on conceptual records, but after these two LPs, he had some serious doubts about writing albums as whole pieces.³⁵

Nevertheless, he released another record in 2010. This time it was his first EP – *All the Delighted People*, which was unannounced and unexpected, and had nearly 60 minutes of all-new music. His another LP – *The Age of Adz* arrived later same year, and was, of course, a concept album. This time, the main theme was the work of Prophet Royal Robertson, who was an American paranoid schizophrenic painter. His apocalyptic paintings, full of monsters, superheroes, and dark atmosphere became an inspiration for Stevens's next album. It was, perversely, his most pop and bestselling record.³⁶ Second Christmas album titled *Silver & Gold: Songs for Christmas, Vols. 6–10*, follow-up of 2006's compilation, was released in 2012.³⁷

In the recent years Sufjan Stevens was involved in working with New York City Ballet, composing an original score to accompany choreography by Justin Peck. Also, he formed a band Sisyphus with Son Lux and Serengeti, and released self-titled album *Sisyphus* in 2014. At the beginning of 2015, collaborating with Aaron and Alex Craig, he completed another Brooklyn Academy of Music-commissioned project called *Round-Up* about American rodeo. In late March he also released his latest album to date – *Carrie & Lowell*. His seventh studio LP's main motif is his mother and stepfather, and the album marks his return to folk music, and is considered to be one of his best.³⁸

2.2. *The Fifty States Project*

Probably the most significant and characteristic part of Stevens's career to date was *The Fifty States Project*. The main concept behind it was to record an album for each state of the United States of America. First one of the series was

³⁵ Ibidem

³⁶ T. Lewis, *Sufjan Stevens: 'I've always been insecure about what I do'*, The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/may/08/sufjan-stevens-interview-age-adz> (27.01.2015).

³⁷ M. Mesquita Borges, *op.cit.*

³⁸ B. Stosuy, *Sufjan Stevens – Carrie & Lowell*, Pitchfork.com, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/2018-carrie-lowell/> (18.05.2015).

Michigan LP, the work that I am focusing on in this paper. He released this album in 2003 and shortly after announced his grand project. At the time of this declaration, he didn't know how to identify it. What's more, he called it "kind of mysterious thing to me, and [he had] no idea what it means." On one hand, it shows how unprepared he was, but on the other this statement reflects the total freedom of his work.³⁹

In his interview with MTV, Stevens depicted *The Fifty States Project* as some kind of investigation on "what it means to be American and understanding American identity." He also added that during the *Michigan* recording sessions he developed an "obsession with American landscape."⁴⁰

After the success of *Michigan* LP, Stevens started working on the second part of project. *Illinois* (stylized as *Sufjan Stevens invites you to: Come on feel the Illinois, or Illinois*) was released in 2005 to extremely high acclaim from music critics. In fact, it was the highest-rated album on Metacritic.com, and was compared to such legendary albums as *Pet Sounds* and *Smile* by The Beach Boys, works by Bob Dylan, Arcade Fire, or even poems by Walt Whitman.⁴¹

The third album of the series, titled *The Avalanche* from 2006, has to be treated only as an addition to *Illinois* LP. It is compilations of outtakes and extras from the *Illinois* recording sessions. Nevertheless, it delivers 21 highly orchestrated compositions, that are not simply songs that did not make the album, because of lack of quality, but rather ones that didn't fit there. One may come to a conclusion that in this case *The Avalanche* is rather a bonus disc to *Illinois*, and not another *The Fifty States Project* chapter.⁴²

Both *Michigan* and *Illinois* consist of state-themed compositions. Every one of them is in some way connected to the LP's main motif. They were classic concept albums which fits in the definition by David Owen Montgomery, who writes that a concept album is an LP that consists of a "totality of linked songs

39 R. Harrington, *Sufjan Stevens's Musical States of Mind*, The Washington Post, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/22/AR2005092200655.html> (27.01.2015).

40 Diskobox, *Sufjan Stevens MTV Interview*, Youtube.com, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHxhc_77neQ (03.02.2015).

41 Ibidem.

42 M. Rich, *Sufjan Stevens – "The Avalanche"*, Chicago Tribune, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2006-07-11/news/0607110345_1_sufjan-stevens-illinois-tracks (27.01.2015).

through compositional (musical and literary) and marketing (graphic and promotional) strategies that were both thematically explicit and undefined.” In addition to that, he writes that a concept album uses “words or lyrics to communicate that theme to listeners (consumers).”⁴³ This fully depicts what both Stevens’s “states albums” are, and how they should be perceived. There is no main character, no story, but the concept and the narrative layer are coherent.⁴⁴

In late 2009, four years after *Illinois*, Stevens admitted that *The Fifty States Project* was taken by him too seriously. In an interview with Paste Magazine, he admitted that “the whole premise was such a joke”, and that “[he] started to feel like [he] was becoming a cliché of [himself].”⁴⁵ After two full length albums and one compilation of outtakes and extras *The Fifty States Project* went on indefinite hiatus. On the other hand, Stevens’s idea of making concept albums survived with *The Age of Adz* and *Carrie & Lowell*.

2.3. Uniqueness of *Michigan* Album

Michigan, the first album of *The Fifty States Project*, is especially interesting, not only in the context of Stevens’s career, but also in the American music as a whole. Just as explained in the previous chapter about cultural texts and their role in constructing an image of a given place, this LP can tell audiences about the way how the author sees his home state, how he wants his fans to perceive it, but not only that. It also tells the history of a place, the author’s interpretation of events that took place there, and, above all, how this state, and the whole United States image, history, and culture are constructed.

One could ask why not to analyze *Illinois* instead, because of its greater success, greater critical acclaim, bigger audience, which semi-objectively show its greater value. First of all, *Michigan* is Stevens’s home state, so the perspective is very specific in this case. He writes songs about his childhood, he shares his thoughts about what his homeland is at the moment, and also he constructs the image of a place he knows, loves, and constantly has on his mind.⁴⁶ *Illinois* is on the other hand the state that Stevens rarely visited and had a much weaker

43 D. O. Montgomery, *The Rock Concept Album: Context and Analysis*, Ottawa, ON: National Library of Canada 2002, p. 33.

44 Ibidem.

45 J. Jacobs, *Sufjan Stevens Calls 50 States Project “Such a Joke”*, Paste Magazine, <http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2009/11/sufjan-stevens-50-states-project-was-such-a-joke.html> (27.01.2015).

46 R. Harrington, *op.cit.*

bond with. He himself admitted that his perspective during gathering pieces of information about this state was rather researcher-like than participant-like. Books were the main source of knowledge for him, not direct experience.⁴⁷ That makes *Michigan* even more interesting, because, as showed earlier, Stevens was born there, grew up in Detroit, later moved to Petoskey, then went to college in Holland where he started his career and ran Asthmatic Kitty with his stepfather. He spent 25 years in his homeland and then moved away from Michigan to New York in 2000. Three years later he released *Michigan*.

This process raises some important questions about the level of subjectivity and specific perspective during recording sessions. Did he write songs about his homeland under the influence of sentimentalism, nostalgia, and homesickness, or maybe he wanted to deal with the demons of his past? Also, an issue of symbolism and allusions known only to the Michiganians, forces to reflect on the subject of versatility of the LPs message, as well as the dilemma of regarding *Michigan* as homage or a native's critique.

There were some cases of artists writing albums about their own home states, or cities, just like *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ* by Bruce Springsteen, *Californication* by Red Hot Chili Peppers, or even *Straight Outta Compton* by NWA, but they had a rather faint main place-centered theme. Regarding them as concept albums is a risky statement. In comparison, Sufjan Stevens's *Michigan* can be considered as one by all means, which makes it so special in terms of music LPs depicting someone's homeland.

A full analysis of the graphics, lyrics, and music, from which this album consists of is included in the following three chapters. By looking at each one of these layers, then comparing and examining them together possible answers for all the questions that are rising while thinking about what *Michigan* really means can be drawn.

While thinking about analyzing the LP, one must also decide which version of it to research. *Michigan* was released in two primary versions – a CD and a vinyl LP. The former, printed originally in 2003 in the US (via Asthmatic Kitty) was reissued in 2004 in the UK (via Rough Trade Records) and in 2007 again in the US (also via Asthmatic Kitty). The LP, released in 2003 as a two-disc vinyl album was issued in the same year in Europe. Both versions differ significantly. There are some minor modifications in graphic design, and even

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

in some songs' arrangements and their lengths. Moreover, the fourth side of the LP version has additional five songs named as bonus outtakes.⁴⁸ This makes the vinyl version much more interesting. It has more material to cover, more graphic designs, which can show the listener a bigger picture. Of course, one has to have in mind the original, CD version of the album. In my analysis, I will focus mainly on the two disc vinyl version, but when necessary, I will compare both issues, show their differences, and how it influences the overall vision of this album.

⁴⁸ *Sufjan Stevens – Greetings From Michigan: The Great Lake State*, Discogs, <http://www.discogs.com/Sufjan-Stevens-Greetings-From-Michigan-The-Great-Lake-State/release/587145> (27.01.2015).

PART II

Say Yes! to Michigan: Sufjan Stevens's *Michigan*

“Still I know what
to wear on my back:
Michigan!
Ponshevaing!
Cadillac!”⁴⁹

49 S. Stevens, *Say Yes! to Mich!gan!* [in:] *Michigan*, Asthmatic Kitty, 2003.

3. Chapter Three: Visual Design

The first thing that a person who wants to listen to an album notices is not the music, or the lyrics – it's the graphics on the front and back cover. Visual design makes the initial impression to instantly shape one's view of an album, convince someone to buy it more strongly, promote it non-musically. It is crucial in every LP's analysis to focus also on the graphics, because without them, the perception of such work would be much less valuable, and, what's even more important, incomplete.

Steve Jones and Martin Sorger at the beginning of their article *Covering Music: A Brief History And Analysis of Album Cover Design* wrote that despite the fact that many scholars have researched that topic, it has been mostly overlooked and depreciated. Visual design plays a significant role not only in promotional terms, but it can also help in researching its content.⁵⁰ The authors of the article are referring to the words of Bob Derfin, the creative director of graphics at Atlantic Records, who said that the cover “gives an identity” to the author, and creates in consumer's mind the idea of what's inside the package – “[if the cover] looks cheap, [...] the vinyl is, too.”⁵¹

Authors of *Covering Music...* also briefly mention booklets, inlays, vinyl discs, and all other graphic design that we encounter inside the package. These elements are also very important in understanding what an actual LP is. After the first impression that front and back covers give the consumer, he or she is exposed to the rest of the graphic material that also influences view and perception of the artist's work. It is especially important if the vinyl version of an album is presented in gatefold form, or the CD version includes a booklet. They represent a great amount of material to analyze in order to acquire knowledge about the LP.

Stevens's *Michigan* was released both as a double gatefold-package vinyl LP and a CD. Both versions differ slightly, mostly in structure of graphic design. Therefore, I would like to analyze the very specific structure of visual side of this LP in the first place. After that, I would look deeply into the significance of this work, and research its role.

⁵⁰ S. Jones, M. Sorger, “Covering Music: A Brief History And Analysis of Album Cover Design” [in:] *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Vol. 11-12, Issue 1 (March 1999), p. 1-3, 16.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 16

Visual design in case of *Michigan* is even more important due to the fact that the layout and design is credited to Sufjan Stevens himself, which means that he organized the way how the LP looks like, where all the graphic elements were placed. One can conclude that this fact can considerably alter a researcher's analysis of the LP, because the author not only have written, performed, recorded, arranged and produced all the compositions, but also was the head of design, which makes him the director of the whole project which he led as he wanted to.⁵²

As one can find on the inside cover of the LP, or the booklet of the CD version, "all original artwork [was] hand painted by Laura Normandin." She attended Cooper Union art school in New York, and has been a craft editor at Martha Stewart Living magazine for 10 years. In addition, she has her own business Wren Handmade. In her artist statement she writes that she makes "books, paintings and artifacts and whatever else catches [her] fancy." But the most important thing, which also gives some perspective on *Michigan* art design, is that Normandin's work focuses on objects that are "generally humble, domestic and ordinary," and that the main idea behind her works is that "[...] the lowly are strong, not despite their brokenness but because of it [...]"⁵³ This gives another clue that may be helpful in research – that the simple, ordinary, and little things that one can encounter in everyday life may be the most significant part of the design.

3.1. Visual Design's Structure

When one takes *Michigan* LP in one's hands, a very characteristic graphic structure is visible. The front cover consists of randomly placed pictures: a white-tailed deer, a white pine covered in snow on a snowy ground, a rainbow trout, outline of Michigan Lake, and apple blossom. There is also a stylized version of the album's title, which will be analyzed in following chapters. On the back cover one can see a raccoon walking on a snow-covered landscape with a river and a few pine trees, another apple blossom, and a painting of The Great Seal of the State of Michigan. On the inside of the gatefold sleeve, there is a big picture of robin on the left. Right side is covered with a big map of Michigan with numerous pictures depicting characteristics of each city of

⁵² S. Stevens, *Michigan*...

⁵³ LAURA NORMANDIN artist statement, lauranormandin.com, http://lauranormandin.com/pages/artist_statement.html (27.06.2015).

the region. When it comes to the vinyl discs, there is one image on each side of labels. In contrast, the compact disc is covered with the outline of Michigan state. The whole package's background is in sand/beige color, which resembles the texture and color of kalkaska sand, State Soil of Michigan.⁵⁴

Without getting into further details and analyses of the meanings of each painting, one could see a leitmotif in packaging and visual design. There is not one, central image that the author wants a consumer to focus on. Instead he presents a series of randomly placed pictures, symbols and landmarks, which can play a very significant role in shaping one's view of the state of Michigan. There is no official State Seal on the front cover, just a few of Michigan State official symbols, which may lead to the conclusion that Stevens wants to emphasize the importance of a more down-to-earth elements of his homeland's landscape. That reasoning would be in line with Laura Normandin's idea behind her work that underlines importance of everyday life.

This album's design makes the impression of chaos, randomization, and being out of order. A consumer is bombarded with symbols, huge amounts of information, clues and allusions. On the other hand, this type of esthetics provides some kind of legend to the map, which the album is. A great number of graphics can be helpful in providing the right information to the recipient, who can not only be overwhelmed with the amounts of material, and discouraged by the lack of knowledge needed to properly read them, but also encouraged to gain the required awareness, and to get familiar with a broader context.

3.2. Visual Design's Analysis

An analysis of the visual content of *Michigan* album can be performed with different approaches emphasized. One could research meaning of each image included in the package, but that would give only a descriptive vision of what a consumer encounters. Instead of that, the more effective way of understanding the concept behind this LP is choosing the path of a more holistic approach. In order to do so, I want to look closer at the three different aspects of visual design deep analysis.

First of all, the role of a specific visual design has to be researched, how it can influence consumer and by what means. Moreover, *Michigan* LP is packed with symbols, so one has to devote a separate part of study to this issue. This

⁵⁴ S. Stevens, *Michigan...*

will show how author uses symbolism to send nonverbal pieces of information to the audience. Third aspect that I would like to analyze is how Stevens, by choosing specific paintings, initially constructs the image of the state of Michigan in a consumer's mind even before he or she listens to the songs or reads the lyrics.

It is possible to venture a statement that one can compare the analysis of such features to researching sheet music in the late 19th/early 20th century, which is considerably popular among social scientists. As Daniel Goldmark writes in his article *Creating Desire on Tin Pan Alley*, it can be a wide source of research of American society and culture – “a wonderful window to the past” and “explicit source of information.”⁵⁵ In this context, *Michigan's* visual design can not only be a subjective vision of the state, but also have historical value, by depicting what are the most important values of this region, and tell something about US culture and society.

3.2.1. The Role of Visual Design

When it comes to roles of graphics included in the LP's package, the first thing that comes to mind is the function of strictly informative character. This not only means that after observing the front cover one can identify the author and the title of the album, or even the main themes of it, but that visual design can also inform the consumer what can be helpful in understanding the music piece properly.⁵⁶

The case of *Michigan* is exceptional by it being a concept album with a very explicit main theme that is known to the listener from the very beginning, after the first glimpse of the front cover. This situation is caused not only by placing the LP's title *Greetings From Michigan The Great Lake State*, or a painted version of Michigan's Great Seal at the back cover, but also because of the various symbols that are included in various locations within the package. Even without an analysis of these images, the consumer can deduce that every picture is in some way connected to the state of Michigan.

By this process, one can easily conclude that besides an informative function, it has its more advanced aim – an educational role. A person who does not know anything about Michigan, can learn, even only by looking at the

⁵⁵ D. Goldmark, “Creating Desire on Tin Pan Alley” [in:] *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 90, Issue 2 (June 2007), p. 200, 204.

⁵⁶ S. Jones, M. Sorger, *op. cit.*, p. 1, 7, 18-19.

package, that apple blossom may be important to the people of this region, that a robin bird may be living or breeding there, that snowy landscape is often seen there, etc.

As it was mentioned before, there is a great number of images ready to be acknowledged by the consumer during an encounter with the LP. This kind of stylization can be understood in many different ways. Apart for the direct clues, which may suggest importance of these items to Michigan's identity, Stevens may want to give consumers a space to analyze these pictures for themselves, by not pointing out any specific significance of any of them. There is no one central image that is key to interpreting every other. In fact, even the Great Seal of the State of Michigan is placed at the top right corner of the back cover, in a representative, but by no means most important location. All of the paintings within *Michigan* package make an impression of a jigsaw puzzle, in which every picture is connected to another with the main motif of Michigan state, but they are all equal, coming together in a very specific image constructed and directed by the author.

Moreover, such great number of pieces of information, placed on the covers, inlays and labels without any explanation encourages the consumer to do research and find out why a painting of waterfalls was put near the village of Tahquamenon on the map of the Upper Peninsula, or why there is an image of a painted turtle on the vinyl disc's Side C label. This, of course, is connected with the educational role of the album's visual design. It has potential to influence the consumers to do research in order to satisfy their curiosity about the meaning of the paintings.

One has to have in mind that there is no obligation of denoting images in order to have a satisfying experience of listening to *Michigan*, just like there is no requirement of knowing the meaning of Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* cover, or The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* cover in order to enjoy their music, but it can doubtlessly help.⁵⁷ It only gives a more complete view of the work, gives the right context that enables better analysis of the whole album. Stevens, by placing unexplained paintings all around the package, gives them the potential of inviting the listeners to learn about the Michigan state itself, and by that educating themselves in this field.

⁵⁷ K. Fowle, *How Pink Floyd Got One of Its Best-Known Covers*, Esquire, <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a25231/pink-floyd-wish-you-were-here-cover/> (27.06.2015).

When a consumer responds to that invitation, he or she becomes aware of the state's history, society, geography and exceptionalism. This process results in a very important factor that influences the further perception of materials found within the package – it strengthens the relationship between the album, the place and the consumer. The listener is able to refer his or her knowledge to real places, history, people of the depicted state, which can be considered as another positive factor in gaining acclaim. By accruing knowledge about Michigan through the *Michigan* album the consumer is connected to both more intensely.

Furthermore, one can interpret the paintings and the concept behind this LP's visual design as the tool to understanding other elements of the album – music and lyrics. It has to be kept in mind that graphics are one of the three main parts of *Michigan*, and the overall understanding can only be accomplished by not only studying them on their own, but also the relation among them, and how do they cooperate and influence each other. One has to take this fact into consideration while analyzing both music and lyrics, as well as during the formulation of general conclusions.

There is also a most trivial explanation of the visual design's role in the *Michigan* LP - artistic vision. It can be assumed that Stevens selected paintings subjectively and placed them since he thought it would support his work best. This assumption must be very seriously taken into consideration given the strictly artistic character of music album as a form. In this context, one has to wonder why Stevens had selected these pictures, and why not others. If he would have chosen different ones, or placed them in a new order, or even enlarge or reduce them in size, it could have radically altered the interpretation of the album by a listener.

This raises other questions about the character of the author's role in shaping the consumer's interpretation of LP. If he has so many options, he also has the power to alter a listener's view of Michigan. This leads to the fact that Stevens makes his interpretation of Michigan the listeners' interpretation. That casts doubt on the relation between the album and the real place, which could be only an illusion depicted by the graphics selected by Stevens to impose his vision of his home state. In fact, one could interpret this situation as the author's relation to imaginary place constructed by him, and presented to the audience through graphics characteristic to Michigan, that have a role of presenting the most significant parts of his homeland's vision.

Of course, there is not just one solution to these doubts. In fact, there cannot be one, due to the artistic character of a music album, but there are few noteworthy directions which one could study in order to understand the author's intentions better. Interpretation of symbols included in packaging might help to outline these paths of research and support conclusions about initial construction of an image of the state of Michigan via visual design.

3.2.2. Analysis and Historical Importance of Graphic Content

Most of the images that are included in *Michigan* album's package are official Michigan state symbols, but not only. There are also paintings that depict the characteristics of places, or just visualize names of famous cities within its borders. In order to make conclusions about the image of the state of Michigan that is depicted in this album, and ways of constructing it, one has to acknowledge their meanings in the state's culture, history, and society.

As it was mentioned before, there are five different paintings on the front cover (from the left to right): a white pine, a white-tailed deer, an apple blossom, an outline of Michigan Lake, and a rainbow trout. One has to have in mind that there are no captions on the cover, so consumers have to find out by themselves what these pictures are depicting.⁵⁸

The first one mentioned, a white pine, is Michigan's official state tree. *Pinus strobus*, adopted as this symbol in 1955, is also called the Tree of Peace by the Iroquois. These trees can live for over 200 years, a number of them in Michigan living over 500 years. They are one of the most popular trees in this state. In the context of the *Michigan* LP they are even more important, because within the package they appear five times (on the front cover, the back cover, the interior cover, and the vinyl label), more than any other of the state symbols. This can be explained by the great role that white pines played in Michigan's history. From 1880s until early 1900s lumber production in this state was the biggest in the whole country, and worth more than all the gold mines in California, which without doubt contributed to the economic development of Michigan.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ It is important to note, that white pine is covered in snow, and white-tailed deer is walking on snow-covered ground, near which there is a small water basin (river or lake).

⁵⁹ J. Lavonier, *Michigan's State Tree: White Pine (Pinus strobus)*, Michigan in Pictures, <https://michpics.wordpress.com/about-michigan-in-pictures/> (06.02.2015).

White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) is another important symbol used in visual design of *Michigan* album. Apart from being the central image of the front cover, it is also featured on the gatefold cover. Deer hunting is a well-established tradition in Michigan. According to Katie Keen from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, approximately 660 000 people participate in the deer season each year, and this is not limited to professionals. It is known that whole families, including children, participate in these events in Michigan.⁶⁰ Moreover, about 700 000 gun licenses are sold at the opening of every season, which only confirms how important the deer hunting is for the Michigianians.⁶¹ Communities of the Upper Peninsula are especially devoted to this activities, an example of which is the play and its film adaptation entitled *Escabana in da Moonlight*, written and directed by Jeff Daniels, who grew up and studied in Michigan.⁶²

White-tailed deer itself is the state's official game animal. Interesting is the fact that the petition to adopt this mammal as a state symbol was sent by a group of fourth graders, and approved by government officials in 1997.⁶³ These animals can be found in every Michigan county, which improves their popularity among the local population. White-tailed deer also played an important role in Michigan's history, as a resource for the Native Americans, and later as an object of extremely intensive shooting that almost caused its extermination in the 1870s. In 1895 a law was passed regulating hunting, and its population grew from 45 000 in 1914 to about 1 500 000 in late 1940s, and 2 000 000 in 1989, strengthening their constant presence in the Michigianians' life since then.⁶⁴

The third official state symbol placed on the front cover is apple blossom, which is Michigan's state flower. It is used also on the back cover and on the map inside packaging. Not the flower itself, but the fruit is even more im-

60 K. Keen, *Deer Hunting Traditions Run Deep in Pure Michigan*, Pure Michigan, <http://www.michigan.org/blog/guest-blogger/family-deer-hunting-traditions-run-deep-in-pure-michigan/> (27.06.2015).

61 S. Clairmont, "Michigan Epitomizes America's Gun-Loving Culture" [in:] *The Hamilton Spectator*, 2 February 2004: p. A02.

62 *Escabana in da Moonlight* (2001), Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0180679/> (27.06.2015).

63 E. McAuliffe, *Michigan: Facts and Symbols*, Mankato, MN: Capstone Press 2003, p. 19.

64 *White-tailed Deer (Odocoileus virginianus)*, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,1607,7-153-10370_12145_12205-56904--,00.html (27.06.2015).

portant in Michigan's culture. This state is ranked third in apple production nationally and first for providing apple slices for apple pies. This fruit is the most valuable crop in Michigan, earning approximately \$700-\$900 million income annually. According to National Agricultural Statistics Service's fact sheet, apple crop is Michigan's "sixth biggest produce commodity behind corn, soybeans, wheat, sugar beets, and potatoes."⁶⁵ Furthermore, there are about 39 000 acres from which apples are harvested in Michigan, which makes more than 10% of acreage assigned for fruit crop in the whole of US.⁶⁶

There are also two other paintings included on the front cover, that are not official state symbols. Lake Michigan is the first of them. It is the only of five Great Lakes that is within United States in its entirety. Its name comes from the Ojibwa (Chippewa) word for "large lake," which was also adopted as the state's name itself. This may be an example of one of the causes of the strong connection between Michigan Lake and Michigan state, which is very important in establishing Michigan's identity. Apart from numerous scenic benefits that this lake provides, it creates a very supportive environment for plants, which contributes to making Michigan the leader in crops like "blueberries, cherries, asparagus, and grapes for juice and wine."⁶⁷ One also has to have in mind that Michigan's nickname is *The Great Lake State*, which is also included in the stylized version of the *Michigan LP's* title.

Rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), also known as the steelhead, is the second, which is neither a Michigan symbol, nor is native to that land. It was imported from California in 1876, and since then spread to all corners of the state, to both Lake Michigan and inland waters. Nowadays it is one of the most popular sport fish in Michigan, which is considered to be one of the best steelhead fishing states in the United States.⁶⁸

When it comes to the back cover, as it was mentioned before, apple blossom and white pines can be seen again. Beside them, there are also two very important paintings that have to be mentioned. In the upper left corner, there is

⁶⁵ L. Sternberg, *Information About Detroit and Michigan Apples*, About.com, <http://detroit.about.com/od/fooddining/ss/Detroit-And-Michigan-Apples.htm#step2> (27.06.2015).

⁶⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁷ *Great Lakes – Lake Michigan*, Pure Michigan, <http://www.michigan.org/michigan-s-great-lakes/lake-michigan/> (25.06.2015).

⁶⁸ *Rainbow Trout*, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-10364_53405-214111--,00.html (25.06.2015).

painted a specific version Michigan's coat of arms. The Great Seal of the state of Michigan consists of a coat of arms on a light blue field in a crimson circle, the state's flag of a coat of arms on a dark blue field, while the LP's version of the coat of arms is on a beige background in an orange circle, which fits into the album's overall color design. The official version of Michigan's coat of arms was adopted by the Public Act 209 of 1911. It depicts an eagle holding an olive branch and arrows on the top. An elk and a moose are the supporters of the shield, which depicts a grassy peninsula, a wavy lake, a sunrise, and a man with a stick standing on the grass. There are also three mottos on the coat of arms, which are: *E Pluribus Unum* (From Many, One), *Tuebor* (I will defend), and *Si Quaeris Peninsulam Amoenam Circumspice* (If You Seek A Pleasant Peninsula, Look About You).⁶⁹

The second one is a wolverine (*Gulo gulo*), which is a very extraordinary example of the animal being associated with this state. Since the beginning of Michigan's existence, it has been nicknamed as "The Wolverine State", mostly because, as noted on the Michigan's official government website, "it was a center for trade in the early trapping industry and wolverine pelts from the north and west of Michigan came through the state." However, if these animals were in fact native to Michigan, they were "extirpated about 200 years ago."⁷⁰ Since then, there was only one instance of a wolverine seen in this state. Two hunting brothers found trails of a wild animal (but not native to Michigan) in 2004, who died six years later in 2010, and was the subject of the book *The Lone Wolverine: Tracking Michigan's Most Elusive Animal* by Elizabeth Phillips Shaw and Jeff Ford.⁷¹ In both CD and vinyl versions of *Michigan* LP wolverine is the main painting on the back cover, even though there are no wolverines in this state, but because of Michigan's nickname and historical value.

When one opens the gatefold vinyl packaging of *Michigan* there are two inlay covers that present another set of paintings that can be analyzed. There is only one picture on the left side of cover, and it represents an American

⁶⁹ *Coat-of-arms and Flag*, Act 209 of 1911, Michigan Legislature, <http://www.legislature.mi.gov/%28S%28jv5vdfhq5w3xofkdyknogxwu%29%29/mileg.aspx?page=getobject&objectname=mcl-Act-209-of-1911> (20.06.2015).

⁷⁰ *The Wolverine*, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, http://michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-10369_46675_57974-253814--,00.html (25.06.2015).

⁷¹ J. McKee, 'The Lone Wolverine' tells the story of a real Michigan wolverine, The Ann Arbor News, <http://www.annarbor.com/entertainment/the-lone-wolverine-tells-the-story-of-a-real-michigan-wolverine/> (27.06.2015).

robin (*Turdus migratorius*), that has its name (“Robin”) written beneath it, so that its recognition is simplified. It is the official Michigan’s State Bird since 1931, by resolution that reads: “The robin is the best known and best loved of all the birds in the state of Michigan.” This is the most widespread thrush on the North American continent, and it was also recognized by similar laws by legislatures of Connecticut and Wisconsin.⁷²

Right side is on the other hand packed with small paintings on the general map of Michigan as described at the beginning of this chapter. Starting from the top – the Upper Peninsula – there is another image of a white-tailed deer, standing near a white pine, which is placed on the south of region described as Copper Range (being Keweenaw Peninsula in fact). Near the town of Tahquamenon on the east side of the Upper Peninsula, there is a painting of waterfalls, which are Tahquamenon Falls. The image depicts the Upper Falls, the bigger of the two waterfalls on the Tahquamenon River. They are the second largest waterfalls east of Mississippi River, and have, according to official website, “drop of nearly 50 feet, more than 200 feet across and a water flow of more than 50 000 gallons per second.”⁷³ Tahquamenon Falls State Park is one of the main tourist attractions of the Upper Peninsula. There are also a few cities that are noted on this part of Michigan, which are: Marquette, Tahquamenon, Paradise, and Sault Saint Marie.

The image that connects the Upper Peninsula with the Lower Peninsula is one that represents the Mackinac Bridge (with caption near the picture), which in fact looks completely different on the album’s map in comparison to reality. Opened to traffic on November 1, 1957, it is one of the longest suspension bridges in the world, and the third suspension bridge in United States.⁷⁴ It has the total length of 26 372 feet, and the length of suspension bridge of 8 614 feet.⁷⁵

72 *Robin Redbreast – Michigan State Bird*, State Symbols USA, <http://www.statesymbolsusa.org/symbol-official-item/michigan/state-bird/robin-redbreast> (27.06.2015).

73 *Tahquamenon Falls State Park*, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, <http://www.michigandnr.com/parksandtrails/Details.aspx?type=SPRK&id=428> (27.06.2015).

74 *The 10 longest suspension bridges in the US*, Road Traffic Technology, <http://www.roadtraffic-technology.com/features/feature-the-ten-longest-suspension-bridges-in-the-us/> (27.06.2015).

75 *Facts & Figures*, Mackinac Bridge Authority, <http://www.mackinacbridge.org/facts--figures-16/> (27.06.2015).

There is another set of paintings included on the Lower Peninsula map. First of all, there are numerous cities highlighted, which are (from North to South): Ponshewaing, Alpena, Traverse City, Cadillac, Pigeon, Remus, Saginaw, Muskegon, Flint, Holland, Lansing, Hell, Detroit, Romulus, and Tecumseh, some of which have paintings accompanying. While some of these towns are indisputably important in Michigan, the choice of especially Ponshewaing, Alpena, Pigeon, Hell, and Tecumseh is rather surprising, considering their low population, or even their status as unincorporated community like the first one mentioned. This suggests some other reasons, besides cultural, social, and political significance as to why Stevens has chosen to distinguish them from others. One of the reason may be a personal connection to these places. Answer to this riddle may be hidden in the songs' lyrics, titles, or even music, which will be analyzed in the following chapter.

South of Ponshewaing the Petoskey Stone (*Hexagonaria percarinata*) can be seen (with a caption beneath). It is a unique stone, since June 1965 it is Michigan's official State Stone, popular in the northern Lower Peninsula, with major concentrations in the area around Petosky, MI, where it is placed on the map. This prehistoric fossil consists of tightly packed, six-sided corallites, which are the skeletons of coral polyps. Petoskey, the place where Sufjan Stevens grew up, is famous among tourists who travel there to buy Petoskey Stones as souvenirs.⁷⁶

Near to Traverse City, there is a little painting of a cherry, which can be explained by the main industry that this city is based on – production of tart cherry. Michigan crops approximately 3,8 million tart cherries every year, which makes about 70-75% of all tart cherries grown in US. Most of them come from the Traverse City area. Since 1924, there were celebrations held in this area to celebrate an affinity for cherries that was once known as the Blessing of the Blossoms, which later became the National Cherry Festival held each July.⁷⁷

Another apple blossom (with a caption) is placed on the west of Cadillac. On the other side, on the east of that city, an image of a brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) can be seen. It is the Michigan State's Fish, which is native to the Upper Peninsula and northern part of the Lower Peninsula, but can be seen around the whole state, wherever there is an appropriate habitat. In fact,

⁷⁶ *Petoskey Stone*, Petoskey Area Visitors Bureau, <http://www.petoskeyarea.com/petoskey-stone-73/> (27.06.2015).

⁷⁷ *Cherry Industry*, Traverse City Tourism, <http://www.traversecity.com/area/about-traverse-city/cherry-industry/> (27.06.2015).

their presence is subject of nationwide debate, because of brook trout's invasive character. This is one of the main reasons why they are treated as game fish, but there are many regulations in order to limit harvesting. This does not change the fact that it is very desirable and popular among the Michiganders.⁷⁸

Following three paintings are very specific in the context of the LP's Lower Peninsula map. All of them are strictly connected to names of townships near which they are positioned. Pigeon, MI is located on the Thumb⁷⁹ of state, close to which a picture of bird is placed. This village's name isn't accidental. It was founded in 1883 as a railroad town, but later the local community started to name it Pigeon, because of the nearby Pigeon River. In turn, the river gained this name due to huge flocks of passenger pigeons living near its stream. This species of birds was extinct by 1914, but the village's name remained.⁸⁰ It's important to mention that the painting does not depict a passenger pigeon, but another, impossible to define, species.

Beneath the name of Holland, MI, there is a picture of a red windmill. The reason for that can be found in this city's history. In the mid-19th century, a group of Dutch immigrants, led by Albertus C. VanRaate, came to the banks of today's Lake Macatawa to settle. They were followed by a large number of other groups from the Netherlands, which made it a generally Dutch-American city. Since the beginning of Holland's existence, it was a popular tourist destination. One of the main reasons for this were the scenic sand dunes nearby, but also, since 1920s, the famous Tulip Time festival. Windmills being one of the symbols of Netherlands are also present in the Holland, MI cityscape. In 1961, a local businessman, Carter Brown, transplanted an authentic windmill from the Netherlands as a memorial to Holland's Dutch heritage, which explains the placing of its painting on the map.⁸¹

78 *Brook Trout, Salvelinus fontinalis*, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-10364_18958-96400--,00.html (27.06.2015).

79 The Thumb is a region of Michigan located east of Flint and Tri-Cities area, north of Detroit. It has its name because the whole Lower Peninsula has a shape that resembles a mitten, and The Thumb is situated in "the thumb" area of this mitten.

80 *How Did Michigan Cities Get Their Names? Part 7*, Pure Michigan, <http://www.michigan.org/blog/region/how-did-michigan-cities-get-their-names-part-7/> (27.06.2015).

81 *Our History*, Holland Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, <http://www.holland.org/about/holland-history/> (27.06.2015).

Looking east of Holland, there is another image of a white pine, this time with a caption. On the right of it, Hell, MI with an accompanying painting of a flame can be seen. Just like in the case of Pigeon and Holland, this picture has an obvious connotation to the town's name. In contrast to both previous examples, there are a few theories considering the origin of Hell's name. NPR's Mark Memmott in his article with suggestive title *Hell Has Frozen Over, Headline Writers Rejoice* researched from where this town's name came. There are sources which state that its origin can be found in the German word for "bright", and that frontiersmen after traveling through wet and infested terrain in the height of mosquito season called it "Hell." Other two involve a man named George Reeves who lived there in the late 1830s and early 1840s. First of them tells a story of Reeves's habit of paying the local farmers with homemade whiskey, which caused their wives to make comments like "He's gone to Hell again." Second one, and most popular theory, is based on the answer that Reeves gave after being asked what he wanted for the settlement's name: "Call it Hell for all I care!"⁸²

The choice of selecting a painting of an automobile near Detroit is rather obvious. This city was connected to this industry since the invention of the car. Ford's pioneering techniques of mass production influenced how Detroit grew, and subsequently become the American leader in automobile manufacturing.⁸³ Identifying the model depicted by the painting is rather difficult due to its poor quality, and the general similarity of a large group of muscle cars produced in Detroit. From the picture one can deduce that it is a two-door sedan, probably produced in the 1970s. This brings to mind such models as Ford Falcon 1970 ½, or Ford Torino, the latter of which, from 1969, '70, or '73 can be the proper answer.

The third fish featured in the visual design of the *Michigan* LP is located in the southern part of Lake Michigan. It can be identified as the largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), a very popular game fish, that populates shallow, weedier waters, and reservoirs with standing timber. This is one of America's most popular choices for fishing. It has not been named Michigan's symbol,

82 M. Memmott, *Hell Has Frozen Over, Headline Writers Rejoice*, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/01/08/260735693/hell-has-frozen-over-headline-writers-rejoice> (27.06.2015).

83 P. Hill, *As Detroit founders, its auto industry soars; rapid globalization leaves city's economy behind*, The Washington Times, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/aug/11/as-detroit-founders-its-auto-industry-soars/?page=all> (27.06.2015).

but due to its popularity and large quantities in the state's lakes, especially in the Southern parts, it can be treated as one of its valid features.⁸⁴

The last painting that can be found on Michigan's map on the gatefold cover of the LP is the one depicting a painted turtle. It cannot be mistaken with any other turtle species because of the caption near the image. It was designated as the official State's Reptile in 1995. It is considered to be the only turtle commonly seen in the whole Michigan. There are also about 10 other native species native to that land, but the painted turtle is definitely the most popular.⁸⁵

In addition, it can be noticed that there is a number of water basins that are highlighted. These are four of five Great Lakes: Lake Superior, Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, and Lake Erie, all of which border Michigan. Muskegon River is the only inland water that is mentioned by name. It has its headwaters in Houghton Lake, from where it flows southwest to Muskegon, MI, where it empties to Muskegon Lake, which is connected to Lake Michigan through a channel. Often called the "Friendly Giant" it is the second longest river in Michigan, while the longest is the Grand River.⁸⁶

Apart from the covers, the vinyl discs are a very important part of the album's visual design. *Michigan* consists of two of them, which makes total of four sides. Each side has a different label with one painting with a caption on a beige background. Images are as follows: Side A – Brook Trout; Side B – White Pine; Side C – Painted Turtle; Side D – Petoskey Stone, all of which were analyzed earlier in this chapter. There is no explanation for the choice of matching a painting to a vinyl side, but that can be resolved after analysis of the lyrics and music.

There are also some major differences in the contexts of graphics between the CD and the two-disc vinyl version of *Michigan* that are worth mentioning. The front and back covers' visual content is mostly the same, with minor changes in the placement of objects. A painting of an American robin is included on the back side of the booklet in the CD packaging, but the biggest change concerns the Michigan's map. There are many images that were omit-

84 Bass, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-10364_53405-213979--,00.html (27.06.2015).

85 *Painted Turtle – Michigan State Reptile*, State Symbols USA, <http://www.state-symbolsusa.org/symbol-official-item/michigan/state-reptile/painted-turtle> (27.06.2015).

86 J. Wynia, J. Wynia, *The Muskegon River*, J & J's River Run, <http://www.jjriverrun.com/muskegon-river.html> (27.06.2015).

ted from the compact disc version, which are: Petoskey stone, brook trout, white pine, and painted turtle. As one can see, those four objects are the same that could be found on the vinyl discs' labels. In the CD version they can be found underneath the compact disc, visible after removing it from the package. When it comes to the disc's label itself, there is a light blue outline of Michigan printed, along with the album's title, and record label details.

3.2.3. Initial Image Construction

As it was mentioned in the brief analysis of potential roles that visual design can play in a consumer's perception of Michigan and the *Michigan* LP, there are many reasons why they are placed in such quantity, form, and manner. From the analysis of the concept behind graphics and meanings behind every painting, one could state beyond any doubt that their presence is not a matter of chance. In fact, their presence is an effect of a deliberate process of designing the whole package, whose role it is to provide information about the main theme of the album. Every image, every caption, every symbol and city is mentioned here because of some reason – of natural, social, cultural, or historical nature.

By studying the covers, the gatefold, each vinyl or compact disc, or the booklet in CD version of *Michigan*, a consumer encounters a series of symbols that are vividly linked to the main theme of the LP. In this case, one has to make note of a high probability of the process of initial constructing of a subjective image of the state of Michigan, just by looking and perceiving those images. In addition, if consumers are also eager to obtain pieces of information about the paintings without captions, they may gain knowledge about Michigan based only on the graphics. Moreover, listeners, just by looking at those paintings, subconsciously and involuntary can learn facts about Michigan, its official symbols, most important cities, what they are famous for, their fauna and flora, and geography. It can strengthen the power of image-constructing that may lead to building a specific attitude towards this state.

The specific role of old Sufjan Stevens's website, where *Michigan* was once distributed must be noted. On the website created in 2003, besides the biographical facts, photographs, data about author's discography, one can read about: Facts of Michigan (nicknames, area, highest point etc.), Symbols of Michigan (Robin, White Pine etc.), and even brief notes about each of album's outtakes. This suggests, even highlights, the historical and documental value of Stevens's work. By creating such website, the author encourages the con-

sumer to do research about the Michigan state, and significantly simplifies this process by providing the most important pieces of information on his own webpage. He gives clues on how to interpret the symbols within the package. This is an interesting example of Stevens's way of shaping the image of Michigan. Most sources about history of this state explain its name origin as one being adapted from an Ojibwa word *mishigamaa*, which means "large water", or "large lake". These sources include the official Michigan website⁸⁷ and Willis F. Dunbar's famous book *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*.⁸⁸ On the other hand, Stevens indicates that Michigan's name came from a Chipewewa word *majigan*, meaning "clearing," which was "inspired by a clearing on the west side of the lower peninsula."⁸⁹

From the carried out analysis, one can conclude that by choosing the specific images, placing them in a characteristic, mosaic-like structure, even building his own, personal map of Michigan, within which he highlights various cities, sometimes not very significant in the overview of state's history, culture, and society, by making connections between those cities and different paintings, and choosing particular symbols, Stevens wants consumers of his album to construct an image of his homeland, according to his script. By directing the layout and design he conducts the process of perception of the state by people who encounter the packaging. Furthermore, by doing so he enables the initial construction of the image of Michigan, even without listening to music, or reading lyrics. Consumers just by looking at these paintings can form an opinion about this state, just by treating the packaging as a mosaic of symbols, as a one, big picture, as a work of art.

87 *Michigan in Brief: Information about the State of Michigan*, Library of Michigan, http://www.michigan.gov/documents/hal_lm_MiB_156795_7.pdf (27.06.2015).

88 W. F. Dunbar, G. S. May, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

89 *Facts of Michigan*, Sufjan.com, <http://web.archive.org/web/20030926014224/http://www.sufjan.com/michigan/facts.html> (27.06.2015).

4. Chapter Four: Texts

This chapter focuses on Stevens's texts included in *Michigan* LP, taking into consideration not only song's lyrics, but also all other texts within the album's package. That will give an overall view of the message that the author wanted to deliver to his audience – this process is necessary to properly acknowledge the intentions of album's author, and fully perceive what he had to offer his audience.

Just like in the graphic side of the LP, when a consumer buys an album, his or her first impression is based on things that can be seen on the outer side of the front and back covers. This is why I want to analyze these texts first, and then move to those placed on the inner side and on the discs. After researching this part of *Michigan*'s writings, I will proceed to analyze each of the song's lyrics, which may, or may not be influenced by the rest of the texts included in the package. This order is a natural one, when consumer is encountering an LP, and I am willing to reconstruct this kind of process of learning what such an album has to offer.

Lyrics are often considered to be the most important part of contemporary music, but one has to keep in mind that graphics and music are just as important as the textual layer of an LP, not forgetting about other accompanying forms of scriptures. It has to be noted that it is one of three complementary parts, that only compared with one another could visualize the whole concept behind the entirety of a given work.

One more thing has to be considered as very important – texts' structure. By researching this element of the LP at the very beginning, different emphases would become noticeable, which will be very helpful in the later part of the work. This will also add another element that could be included in the analysis of texts, and play a significant role in broadening the spectrum of research possibilities.

This makes the order to be as follows: the analysis of texts' structure, followed by the research of the cover's texts and the song lyrics. After this process, I will focus on a more detailed study, which will include specifying leitmotifs of the album, trying to examine the relation between the composition's titles and their content, as well as the role of the usage of symbolism and allusions to the Michigan state.

Part II

4.1. Texts' Structure

4.1.1. Packaging and Vinyl Discs

To introduce the textual structure of *Michigan* album, it is most appropriate to describe what can be found in both parts – cover texts and lyrics. First of all, on the front cover, as described in the previous chapter, the title of the album and the author's name can be seen. However, while the record's official title is *Michigan*, a different, stylized version of it is placed here. Full title, along with the artist's name is as follows: *SUFJAN STEVENS presents... Greetings From Michigan The Great Lake State*.

The textual structure on the back cover is far more complicated. On the very top, the title of the album is placed once again, but in a different order of words: "Michigan Greetings From The Great Lake State". There is also list of songs located on the left, divided into vinyl sides. The last side is named "Bonus Outtakes". Beneath it, there are overall pieces of information about the record companies and copyrights. Nevertheless, the most important part is a long note (nearly 1100 words) written by Stevens, covering a significant part of the back cover, which will be analyzed in detail in a further part of this chapter.

After opening the gatefold of the LP version of *Michigan* another part of texts can be seen. On the left side, there are all lyrics of the songs on the album, but, what is interesting, in different order than on the record. First three songs are lined just like on LP, but after that rest of them are arranged without any deeper meaning. Order is as follows: compositions number 1, 2, 3, 11, 4, 8, 7, 13, 5, 19, 20, 12, 16, 17, 9, 15, and 18. This sequence seems to be completely random. Apart from the graphic elements, on the right side of the front cover its version of title can be found. There is also Michigan's State Motto "If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you." right above it.⁹⁰ Beneath the title, there is list of contributors, and, again, notes about the record companies, places where recording took place, and copyrights.

4.1.2. Lyrics

The lyrical structure of *Michigan* is much more sophisticated. There are 15 compositions in the main part of this LP with 5 bonus outtakes, which have to be interpreted as an addition to the 15-song core of this album. The whole

⁹⁰ *State Motto*, Michigan's Official Website, http://www.michigan.gov/som/0,4669,7-192-29938_30245-2606--,00.html (20.06.2015).

album is divided into three parts of 5 songs each, occupying different sides of the vinyl discs. The first song on the album, *Flint (For the Unemployed and Underpaid)*, has only two stanzas and a refrain, and can be considered as an introduction to the rest of the material. After this, there come four other songs, which together (5 tracks in total) make the first part of this LP.

The sixth composition, *Tahquamenon Falls* is an instrumental piece and marks the opening of the second part of *Michigan*. It is followed by three songs, *Detroit, Lift Up Your Weary Head! (Rebuild! Restore! Reconsider!)*, being its culmination point (and central, eighth composition). It ends with another instrumental piece called *Alanson, Crooked River* which highly resembles the previous one.

The third part of this LP, another 5 songs, begins with *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie*, which is a short song, with only 12 verses of lyrics, which makes it an introduction to others. Following two tracks have sophisticated, long lyrics, and a rich song structure in contrast to the introduction. After them comes *Redford (For Yia-Yia & Pappou)*, which is the third and last instrumental piece on the LP that plays the role of an interlude and introduction to the LP's finale, which is *Vito's Ordination Song*. Of course, there are also 5 bonus outtakes after this part that have to be treated as an addition to the core content of album.

One could also devise a particular structure of themes within this framework. First side of the LP can be considered as focused mainly on Michigan's reality and what it means for the natives. Songs from 6 to 10 tell stories about particular places and the narrator's personal experience considering these locations. The last part of *Michigan* core compositions has emphasized religious themes connected to deep and intimate personal reflections. The fourth side, consisting of bonus outtakes, has two main themes – childhood stories and general remarks.

Realizing this very strict structural agenda is helpful in analyzing each part of the packaging's text and song's lyrics. This could work as a starting point, the main clue to researching the meaning of the whole album, and each part of its content on its own. Together, all these elements work as a concept album about the state of Michigan, which must be taken into consideration at all times, and analyzed with that in mind.

4.2. Texts' Analysis

When studying all the texts included in the *Michigan* LP, in contrast to the visual design research, there is no need for describing the details of each symbol, reference, or the meaning of every word. While in the visual layer each

painting had its significant part in influencing the view of the state of Michigan, when approaching the texts on the LP's package, or reading lyrics, the overall expression is what matters most. Of course, the deeper analysis can cause a greater acknowledgment of the image of Michigan, but when it comes to poetry, or longer poetic forms, there is no sense in analyzing every word, and trying to assign meaning to them. Because of that, the more efficient research would consist of trying to study a text's general overview, what image of Michigan it depicts, what artistic measures are used in order to achieve the author's particular goals, how he constructs this specific Michigan's image, and how it influences the recipients.

In order to do so, it is the best to analyze the texts located on the packaging, the vinyl discs, and the lyrics in the same fashion as that proposed above. Using the results of structural study would become extremely significant in finding out the most probable meanings of *Michigan* LP's content. Of course, as in every artistic achievement, this album can be interpreted in numerous ways, but with the context of structure, general idea behind it, as well as sources from Sufjan Stevens himself, the margin of error can be minimalized.

4.2.1. Packaging and Vinyl Discs

As mentioned before, the only scripture included on the front cover of *Michigan* is its artistically stylized title, whose full version is *SUFJAN STEVENS presents... Greetings From Michigan The Great Lake State*. It is important to acknowledge this stylization as "retro" or "vintage", resembling the look of the early 20th century postcards. These are very popular among today's collectors, and present the "Greetings From" phrase among with pictures/paintings being most representative and popular for the particular place.⁹¹ Although, because of the different fonts, the title on the front cover does not look like a typical postcard of this kind, but definitely recalls the general concept.⁹² It is also important to keep in mind the meaning of the phrase "The Great Lake State" which is one of the official nicknames of the state of Michigan.⁹³

91 P. Wiggins, *A Love for Old Postcards*, About.com, <http://antiques.about.com/cs/bookspaper/a/aa110499.htm> (20.06.2015).

92 *Greetings from ... Tour of vintage US postcards*, KRMG.com, <http://www.krmg.com/gallery/travel/greetings-tour-vintage-us-postcards/gCBn5/> (23.06.2015).

93 *Michigan's State Facts*, Michigan Department of Transportation, <http://www.michigan.gov/mdot/0,4616,7-151-11151-67959--,00.html> (23.06.2015).

The main writing piece of the back cover, which occupies most of its space, is the long, very poetic in nature, and untitled essay written by Sufjan Stevens himself. This scripture is not included on the CD version of *Michigan*, being exclusive to its vinyl LP form. It is mainly because of the space-saving issue, but it has to be kept in mind that it also has not been included in the CD version's booklet.

The whole text is divided into 8 paragraphs, each of them being focused on distinct issues concerning Michigan, with introduction, main part, and conclusion. It starts with the sentence "Welcome to Michigan!" that from the first instance depicts what the whole essay will be about, as well as tells the reader that through this text its recipients travel to Michigan and learn about this state first-hand.

The beginning of the essay emphasizes the most famous places of the Great Lake State. But the focus is not only on the big municipalities, but rural regions with many mentions of the Upper Peninsula. The general tenor of this paragraph is optimistic, focusing on the positive aspects of Michigan. Second one is written in similar fashion, but the people, the community, are the most important. It begins with the sentence "The people are generous, warm, outgoing, helpful, industrious, always willing to lend a hand." and follows with numerous less popular locations and activities that can be considered to be known only to the natives. It is the second and last clearly descriptive and optimistic paragraph in the whole essay.

Third part can be treated as the introduction to the story of Detroit. The narrator addresses the city directly ("Oh Detroit, [...]"), which is personified and described as a "complicated old man, nearly dead [...]". Generally, the municipality is described as a place that this "old man" has created and nearly destroyed, e.g. "You have built magnificent buildings only to burn them." The next paragraph is a general accusation, directed to the personified Detroit, of the decline of the city's community, the city itself and its most famous features. It is also written that the metropolis' residents "have run wild with [...] reckless car rides downtown, rigorous dancing, drug taking, knife-stabbing, pillow-stuffing, tail wagging restlessness. [...] They have been out of their minds. They have been left with nothing." This semi-sarcastic and very depressing depiction of Michigan's most famous (or infamous) city constructs a very distinct image of this place, filled with crime and stagnation.

On the other hand, the fifth paragraph starts with a declaration that “even still, here and now, there is a renaissance of hope.” In this short segment, Stevens states that there is a possibility of a bright future for Detroit and the whole Michigan. He mentions that repopulation and revitalization of this region could soon take place. The same theme is continued in the following, sixth and longest segment. The narrator is self-described for the first time as “us” and “we”, and it stays that way until the end of the essay. The focus is on community – “Who is your neighbor? He is your brother. Who is that stranger? She is your mother.” A feeling of being a family as the whole population of Michigan is vividly highlighted – things in their homeland are going very bad, but if they work together, they can change this region for better. Furthermore, being nice and helping each other is the key to bringing Michigan to its glory. This statement’s main message is to change the image, and to work on one’s homeland from the individual’s level – “one person at a time”.

The seventh paragraph is the most philosophical, making references to duty of mankind and religion. The narrator, who now describes himself as “Michiganders” (in plural form) states that humanity was creating the world from the beginning, and it is the task of the people to change things. On the other hand, there are strong religious references in the sentence that “[every person’s feature] have been designed from the very beginning. [...] We have been made to find these things for ourselves and take them in as ours, like adopted children: habits, hobbies, idiosyncrasies, gestures [...]. They have been put in us for good measures.” The main message of this section can be interpreted as stating that people create places that they live in, but there is a greater plan, which they all have a place in.

Finally, the conclusion, which is the eighth and last paragraph, starts with the narrator admitting their imperfection, but also stating that there is no need to hide them as they did before, because there is always “someone right here who knows you more than you do [...]”. This can be another allusion to the Christian God, but also to the community of people of Michigan, and recognizing them as one family. The paragraph ends with a strong statement that the idea of community, the idea of family, and what is most important, the idea of home, are what matters the most – “This is where you belong.”⁹⁴

94 S. Stevens, *Michigan...* Essay can be found only on the back cover of vinyl LP version of album in question.

When analyzing Stevens's very poetic essay as a whole, it cannot be categorized as invitation, advertisement, criticism, or reflection. In fact, it has elements that are characteristic for all of those forms. At the beginning it is optimistic and welcoming, but further in the text, it becomes more criticizing and depressing. Eventually, it states that the most important aspects of a certain city, region, or state are its people, the feeling of community that will overcome every problem. When it comes to constructing an image of Michigan, one can have the impression of an attractive rural area, with a lot of landmarks and natural sites, and declining industrial cities. The Great Lake State is also described as a place where despite all its issues, there is hope, and with the help of each other (and a higher force having everything planed "from the very beginning"), it will eventually get better. All in all, it ends on a happy note, marking that Michigan is the place "where you belong", that regardless of its imperfection, there is a bright future, mostly because of its wonderful people and feeling of a big community, a family. It has a reflective nature, from the perspective of "Michiganders", the natives, who tend not to idealize, but to depict it just as it is – being proud of their homeland, acknowledging its flaws, but also having hope for the better future, and basing this future in the collective work of the community.

Scriptures on the interior of the gatefold packaging of the LP that can be analyzed are mostly songs' lyrics, but these will be researched in the following subchapter. The right side is occupied mostly by the Michigan's map, as described in visual design part of this work. There is also the album's title and the state's motto present. More important are the engravings on the vinyl discs, which consist of four phrases that could be considered as each disc's official subtitles.

Side A's scripture is "Say YES! to Michigan", a variation of the title of the LP's fifth song "Say Yes! to M!ch!gan!" (also known as "Say Yes! to Michigan" or "Say Yes! to Michigan!" due to its specific spelling). This is the direct reference to an advertising campaign that ran in Michigan in the 1980's and 1990's. In 1980, state officials were facing the recession in their homeland so they decided to hire a company that would develop a slogan promoting this region. It was used to "encourage greater enterprise and commerce within Michigan." This campaign's official name was "Say Yes to Michigan", which was in 1984 broadened to "Yes M!CH!GAN" advertising.⁹⁵ The official trademark, along

⁹⁵ *Mihalek Corporation v. the State of Michigan*, 814 F. 2d 290, United States Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit, 1987, <http://openjurist.org/814/f2d/290/mihalek-corporation-v-state-of-michigan-j-j> (27.06.2015).

with the logo was registered in 1982⁹⁶, followed by TV spots.⁹⁷ It is also important to mention that the last song on Side A is “Say Yes! To M!ch!gan!” itself, which corresponds with the side’s name. Apart from that, one has to have in mind that the leading theme of this part of the LP emphasizes the general reality of living and making Michigan a better place. In the context of the advertising campaign with particular goals described above, it is clear that both meanings match themselves.

The engraving on the Side B of *Michigan* reads “Go! Tigers!” which refers to Detroit Tigers, a Major League Baseball team, competing within the American League. When looking at the phrase itself, the traditions of rally cries come to mind. However, “Go! Tigers” has not been the official Detroit Tiger’s battle cry, or their motto. The most popular include “Always a Tiger”, “Bless You Boys”, “Deee-troit Base-ball”, “Eat ‘Em Up Tigers! Eat ‘Em Up!”, or “Who’s your Tiger?”.⁹⁸ On the other hand, “Go! Tigers” resembles the very general concept of cheering a sport team, word “go” being the universal one. Its usage on Side B is also no accident, because the central song of this part of album, as well as the whole LP is a composition *Detroit, Lift Up Your Weary Head! (Rebuild! Restore! Reconsider!)*, whose title is itself a rally cry for Detroit. The above-mentioned baseball team is also mentioned in the lyrics of that song.

The official State of Michigan motto “If you seek a Pleasant Penninsula, look about you.” (with the word peninsula being misspelled with double “n”) is engraved on the run-off groove of Side C, which concludes the core content of the LP in question. Divie Bethune Duffield, Carlisle, PA-born lawyer that later relocated to Detroit, Michigan, when he gained fame as a prominent local poet⁹⁹, remembers that as a law student he had conversations about the issue of future Michigan’s motto with Lewis Cass – then future-Governor of Territory of Michigan and 22nd United States Secretary of State under the presidency of James Buchanan, as well as a military officer and an architect.

96 *Say Yes To Michigan! – Trademark Details*, JUSTIA Trademarks, <https://trademarks.justia.com/733/57/say-yes-to-michigan-73357611.html> (26.06.2015).

97 J. Hick, *TV Spot – Say Yes to Michigan.wmv*, Youtube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BoMfpgH-Tls> (27.06.2015).

98 M. McMurray, *Nicknames and slang of the Detroit Tigers*, ZinZin, <http://www.zinZin.com/observations/2012/nicknames-and-slang-of-the-detroit-tigers/> (20.06.2015).

99 J. R. Elkins, *Divie Bethune Duffield*, *Strangers to Us All: Lawyers and Poetry*, <http://myweb.wvnet.edu/~jelkins/lp-2001/duffield.html> (25.06.2015).

Cass designed the tomb of Sir Christopher Wren in the crypt of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, where he placed the inscription *Si momentum requiris, circumspice.*, which translates to "If you require a moment, look around you." In order to pay respect to Michigan's "distinguishing feature" (being placed on two peninsulas), Cass decided to modify the sentence by replacing *momentum requiris* by *quaeris peninsulam amoenam*. There is no source to the origin of the word *tuebor*, but it is highly probable it was added as the reference to Michigan's role of the frontier and the defender of the boarder of the British colonies. The motto *Si quaeris peninsulam amoenam, circumspice*, which translates to "If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you" was adopted in 1835 by the Michigan's constitutional convention.¹⁰⁰ In addition, the Great Lake State's Official Website states that this statement depicts its land as one of "great splendors", "full of natural beauty, historical importance and citizens full of hope and energy [...]"¹⁰¹ This, of course, has to be treated as a promotional gimmick, but it corresponds with the content of the Side C of the *Michigan* LP. Main themes that appear in this part include personal, intimate reflections and references to religion, as well as thoughts about the condition of Michigan and how to improve it. Themes of so-called "seeking of pleasant peninsula" as wondering how to make reality better, and "looking about" as having trust in society, people in close community, are visible throughout the last 5 compositions of *Michigan*.

The bonus and outtakes side of the album's vinyl version has another scripture on the run-out groove, which is "The Great Lake State." with a dot at the end. It is, as mentioned before, one of the state's official nicknames (The Great Lakes State and The Lakes State are also known versions¹⁰²) that can be found on the state's quarter-dollar coin.¹⁰³ Other nicknames include "Wolverine State" and "Water Winter Wonderland" as pointed out by the Michigan Official Web-

¹⁰⁰ S. Farmer, *The history of Detroit and Michigan, or, The metropolis illustrated: a chronological cyclopaedia of the past and present: including a full record of territorial days in Michigan, and the annuals of Wayne County*, Detroit, MI: Silas Farmer & Co 1884, https://archive.org/details/cihm_02950 (27.06.2015), p. 90-91.

¹⁰¹ *State Motto*, Michigan's Official Website...

¹⁰² *The State of Michigan*, Netstate.com, http://www.netstate.com/states/intro/mi_intro.htm (25.06.2015).

¹⁰³ *Great Lakes State – Michigan State Nickname*, State Symbols USA, <http://www.state-symbolsusa.org/symbol-official-item/michigan/state-nickname-state-quarter/great-lakes-state> (26.06.2015).

site.¹⁰⁴ When it comes to pointing out the meaning of “The Great Lake State.” as the title of Side D, one has to realize that the main theme of the bonus compositions are the childhood stories and wide-ranging remarks. Connecting early years of Michigianians with the state’s nickname along with its universal meaning of its most common feature – the Great Lake of Michigan and lakes in general – makes it an understandable choice. Also, the usage of the dot at the end of the engraving can be treated as a symbolic ending of the album.

Such a detailed analysis of these writings is crucial to fully understand the meaning of content of the LP’s songs. The album’s title, as well as each side’s titles provide essential pieces of information that could be treated as keys to the lyrics’ interpretation, and cross-checking a researcher’s analysis. This kind of guidelines are just as important as the lyrics themselves, they can provide as much data as the songs’ texts. Of course, one must not depreciate the importance of lyrics, but the image is built by all of the album’s content, not only songs, but packaging as a whole.

4.2.2. Lyrics

Researching the lyrics structure and meanings of each side’s titles of the vinyl version can be treated as a starting point to the detailed lyrics analysis. Like it was mentioned before, the whole album is divided into three parts and one additional part of bonus outtakes. Each segment occupies one side of two vinyl discs (total of four sides: A, B, C, D), which can be characterized by presenting different themes, and having internal structure of its own. Having that in mind is crucial for a proper analysis of each lyric – recognizing a given song as an introduction, interlude, main part, conclusion, etc. is extremely influential in terms of reading its sense properly. Concluding from this, each song could have a different meaning while studied on its own than when taking others into consideration and researching it as part of a bigger whole. This is why it is instrumental to refer to the album’s structure throughout the analysis of its lyrics.

Side A of the *Michigan* LP unofficially titled as *Say YES! to Michigan* begins with *Flint (For the Unemployed and Underpaid)*. The composition starts with the verse “It’s the same outside”, which depicts the stagnation and the lack of change and sets tone for the rest of the album – it’s the first impression that

¹⁰⁴ *Michigan’s State Facts*, Michigan Department of Transportation...

a consumer has while listening to the LP. The entire song depicts the personal story of the narrator trying to get a job in a declining environment, his determination and desperation. Concluding from the song's title, it is addressed to the "Unemployed and Underpaid" people of city of Flint. Lyrics are depressing, very dark, suggesting that Michigan is struggling with serious issues, which is interesting in the context of the side's title and general overview of the album's packaging suggesting a rather optimistic view of this state, and its documental character. One can conclude from the very beginning that this LP will not be a propagandist work of art, trying only to promote the Great Lake State, its tourist attractions and economic potential – it may rather be a first person perspective of Michigan's reality. Having in mind the minimalistic arrangement and the ascetic and short lyrics, this song can be treated as an introduction to the rest of the material.

On the contrary, the second track on the album, *All Good Naysayers, Speak Up! Or Forever Hold Your Peace!* is radically different. Written from a general perspective it does not provide any story. Its lyrics can be rather treated as a manifesto, promoting active participation in changing the way things are done in the state. The narrator writes, in a very poetic way, that Michigianians can not only think of ideas to change their living for the better, but take action and focus on themselves, not others. Above all, similarly as stated in the back cover essay, working together, believing in a community, and basing every activity on "[...] love, a perfect measure!" is the key to achieving great goals. *All the Good Naysayers...* is the one of two compositions in *Michigan* that has a nature of a manifesto, propagating the change of the state's reality and ways to do it, the other being *They Also Mourn Who Do Not Wear Black (For the Homeless in Muskegon)*.

The rest of the Side A restores the first person perspective of the lyrics, but in three different perspectives. Sufjan Stevens, at his concert on March 10th 2004, explained the origin of the song *For the Widows in Paradise, For the Fatherless in Ypsilanti*. He stated that when he played for his high school's football team, he traveled to Paradise, MI to play in a tournament. During the match, Stevens noticed that there were mostly women in the audience (presumably mothers and grandmothers), and no men. He imagined a story saying that all the men died in the war, and all women were widows. Despite of that all the women were happy, contributing to "optimistic community and [...] seemed to be working together, and it was, like, women of the world take

over.”¹⁰⁵ It is also extremely important to include the other interpretation of the text, which is a religious one. Stevens is known to include many Christian themes in his work, the album *Seven Swans* from 2004 being one of the examples.¹⁰⁶ The religious interpretation assumes that the title of the song is a reference to a Bible verse – James 1:27, which reads: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”¹⁰⁷ The lyrics are written in a first person perspective, and it is highly probable that the narrator is Christ himself. It is also likely that each stanza tells a story of Christ’s death and his prayer while dying on the cross, or in the garden of Gethsemane. In the verses “Still I must obey, still I must invite. / If there’s anything to say, if there’s anything to do, / If there’s any other way, I’ll do anything for you” Christ tells about his loyalty to God. Later in the text, he speaks of a “father to impress” and a “mother’s mourning dress”. One could think that Christ is the resemblance of every Michigian and member of community that must do everything in their power to see this place improved.

Say Yes! to M!ch!gan! is the fourth song on the album, the most patriotic composition on the LP, which explores themes of loyalty to homeland, pride of being Michigian, longing to go back to the home state. There are numerous references to places of Great Lake State like e.g. “Still I know what / to wear on my back: / Michigan! / Ponshevaing! / Cadillac!”, “Rivers run interstate, Michigan”, “Still I often think of going back / To the farms, to the farms / Golden arms, golden arms” just to cite a few. There is no word about the problems that Michigan was struggling with, or the harsh reality. The song’s title, as explained in the section where the vinyl discs sides’ meanings are explained, is taken from the state’s ad campaign from the 1980s, and just like its goal was to promote Michigan, this can be treated as the main theme of this composition – promotion. The narrator tells the story of his personal relation with the state, his sentimentalism, nostalgia, and longing. As well as that, there are

¹⁰⁵ S. Stevens, *3.10.04, AB Club, Brussels, Belgium*, Rawkblog, <http://rawkblog.net/mp3/bootlegs/Sufjan%20Stevens-3.10.04%20AB%20Club,%20Brussel/Sufjan%20Stevens%20-%20AB%20Brussel%203-10-2004.mp3> (27.06.2015).

¹⁰⁶ B. Myers, *Theology with Sufjan Stevens: heaven in ordinary*, Faith and Theology, <http://www.faith-theology.com/2008/06/theology-with-sufjan-stevens-heaven-in.html> (23.06.2015).

¹⁰⁷ *James 1:27* [in:] *Bible (New International Version)*, Bible Gateway, <https://www.bible-gateway.com/passage/?search=James+1%3A27&version=NIV> (27.06.2015).

numerous verses that suggest the important role that Michigan played and is playing in the life of the narrator. He reminds himself of that fact in verses: “If I ever meant to go away / I was raised, I was raised / In the place, in the place”, or “Tried to change the / Made in Michigan / I was raised [...] / In the place [...] / Part to remind me.” General message of *Say Yes! to Michigan!* is conveyed within the song’s title – to acknowledge the beauty of this state, to be proud of being Michiganians, and that even when the narrator left his homeland, he remembered his roots. This track has also the signs of autobiographical motifs, because of Stevens’s relocation to New York few years before this LP’s release.

The last song on Side A is *The Upper Peninsula*, written in fashion of *Flint...*, where consumer reads the story of men who “live in America / With a pair of Payless shoes”, in the Upper Peninsula. Narrator is the person, who is divorced, residing in “trailer home / with a snow mobile, my car”. He also states that “the window is broken out / And the interstate is far”. This image that he constructs depicts this part of Michigan as cold, snowy weather is overwhelming to that extent that he can treat snow mobile as car. Besides that, the Upper Peninsula is pictured being wild, where almost no one lives, and it is difficult to move around. The main motif of the song is the phrase of “strange ideas” that reflects the different approach to world of narrator, his wife, and their child. The last stanza is the most depressing part, with the last four verses being “I lost my mind / I lost my life / I lost my job / I lost my wife”, which makes consumer think of the Upper Peninsula and whole Michigan as unpromising, miserable, and gloomy region. On the other hand, one can interpret the first verses of the song, that despite unhelpful perspectives, narrator is proud to be living in America, which also suggests that this story can happen everywhere, the Upper Peninsula being only one of the examples.

Side B can be characterized quite differently, because of the different themes that it explores and the ways in which it does that. It is important to mention at the very beginning that the *Go! Tigers!* side of this LP includes two instrumental compositions, which will be explored thoroughly in the next chapter. They are the first (*Tahquamenon Falls*) and the last (*Alanson, Crooked River*) tracks on the side. But one has to remember that their titles suggest the focus on particular places on the map of Michigan. This means that of the total of five songs, only three have lyrics. All of them emphasize distinct locations in the context of Stevens’s personal experiences – there are clear references to author’s life events and his reflections about them.

Holland, song number seven on the album's track list, is not about Holland – the European country, but about Holland – the city on the west coast of the Lower Peninsula, where the author went to the local Hope College. It has only two stanzas with a total of nine verses. One can read from them the preparation to departure: “All the time we spent in bed / Counting miles before we set”; emotional experiences during his time there: “Fall in love and fall apart”; a fear of missing out on the important elements of college life: “Things will end before they start”; as well as the characteristics of the city itself that included “Factories and marching bands”. The narrator tells the story of his life during his education in Holland and how he felt about it, with all the emotions and things that he felt crucial to his adventures there. One may say that it is a reflection of the importance of Holland's role in his life. It is interesting that every verse of these lyrics has seven syllables, which makes it a sophisticated poem reflecting Stevens's experience as a writer and the education he gained in this field during his time in the New School for Social Research in New York City.

The following composition, placed literary in the central place of the album (eighth song of fifteen core total) is *Detroit, Lift Up Your Weary Head! (Rebuild! Restore! Reconsider!)* which can be considered as one of the culmination points of the whole LP. This track is a general depiction of the largest city of Michigan from the point of view of the narrator (who is probably Stevens himself). Lyrics consist of short statements and enumeration of the most important places in the Motor City. It has a structure of one long stanza, chorus, a shorter version of first stanza, long interlude, and repetition of the chorus as a finale. Stanzas depict what Detroit is: “Once a great place. Now a prison. / All I can say. All I can do. / People Mover: Bad decision. / From suburban. Now a prison. / All I can say. All I can do.” This is followed by the chorus, which has an ambiguous meaning. It involves four short sentences: “From the trembling walls. Its' a great idea! / Everything you want. It's a great idea!”. One could interpret those as being sarcastic, because the narrator speaks of tearing down the city, for which he feels sorry about. “Trembling walls” can be interpreted as the demolition of J.L. Hudson Building, which ceased to exist five years before the premiere of the *Michigan* LP.¹⁰⁸ This event was seen as the demolition of the “screen upon which [Detroit residents] can replay an ideal-

¹⁰⁸ TheLoizeauxGroupLLC, J.L. Hudsons Department Store – GUINNESS WORLD RECORD!! – Controlled Demolition, Inc., Youtube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JP1HJoG-1Pg> (25.06.2015).

ized past – a past without any of the problems that made the utopian promise of suburbia worth abandoning the city to fulfill”.¹⁰⁹ In this context, the lyrics’ “It’s a great idea!” seem like irony served by the author. At the end of the song, in the repetition of the chorus, an additional verse appears – “From the Renaissance. It’s a great idea!”. “The Renaissance” is The Renaissance Center, the world headquarters of the General Motors Company. When one accepts the interpretation of sarcasm of those sentences, it can be seen that the author does not believe in the future of the automobile industry in Detroit and their ability to revitalize the city. On the other hand, when read literary, the narrator points that in order to bring life back to this city, there is a need for radical action, and having hope in industry that once made Detroit great – cars. Another interesting part of the song is the lengthy interlude, during which the artist sings about the total of sixteen elements that are characteristic for Detroit and Michigan. They are all divided into four groups of four, where first three components have good connotations, and fourth the opposite – “Henry Ford. Public Trans. Pontiac. Feed the poor. City Hall. Windsor Park. Saginaw. After dark. Tigers game. Eighty-four. Industry. Unemployed. Gun Control. Wolverine. Iroquois. Industry. Public Trans. Auto Cars. Jefferson. Michigan”. Each of these places, people, streets, events, moments etc. have distinct place in Detroit’s reality. For example, 1984 was one of the best seasons of Detroit Tigers, when they won World Series¹¹⁰; Iroquois Avenue is placed in the historic Indian Village neighborhood, which is considered to be one of Detroit’s most affluent¹¹¹, etc. It is important to note that the word “Michigan” is the fourth in a series, in the place of a negative aspect of Detroit. Most of these references may be not clear for somebody who is not familiar with the city’s history and clear exclusively to the natives. It is also important that the whole song ends with a chorus’s sentence “Everything you want.” which can be interpreted as the potential that lays within this city, that there is an ability to do something that will “rebuild”, “restore” and “reconsider” Detroit as Michigan’s

¹⁰⁹ J. Herron, *The Forgetting Machine: Notes Toward a History of Detroit*, Places Journal, <https://placesjournal.org/article/the-forgetting-machine-notes-toward-a-history-of-detroit/> (23.06.2015).

¹¹⁰ 1984 World Series, Baseball Almanac, <http://www.baseball-almanac.com/ws/yr1984ws.shtml> (26.06.2015).

¹¹¹ M. Fusco, *Neighborhood Profile: Indian Village*, Visit Detroit, <http://blog.visitdetroit.com/entry/neighborhood-profile-indian-village.html> (25.06.2015).

grandest. That suggests that in general there is hope for the Motor City, and despite the urban decay and numerous problems described in these lyrics, it can flourish once again.

The next song, *Romulus*, makes reference in its title to the city of Romulus, a suburban city located within the metropolitan area of Detroit, and is home to Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport. What is interesting, the city itself is not the main theme of lyrics: a difficult relation between a child and his mother from the perspective of the former. As in the most of the compositions, it is highly probable that the narrator is Stevens, because he provided the background of his relation with his mother Carrie himself.¹¹² There is a mention of Oregon, where his mother lived with her then-boyfriend, future-husband Lowell, with whom Stevens founded Asthmatic Kitty in 2000, and also a feeling of alienation and lack of connection with the mother, which he describes throughout the lyrics, especially when she left him and his siblings with a dying “grandpa”. The usage of “Romulus” as a city is interesting in context of the story. This place seems irrelevant in the first impression, but in fact functions as a place that had the potential to change his life, to finally disconnect with her. It is also worth mentioning that usage of the detail, which is the cameo role of the city of Romulus, suggests a child’s perspective, who usually remembers details vividly. On the other hand, “Romulus” may also refer to the myth of Remus and Romulus, who were abandoned by their mother Rhea Silvia, saved by a wolf, and after being brought up in a shepherd’s family, they decided to found a new city – Rome.¹¹³ In this context, one could think of the eponymous character as the narrator and Silvia as Stevens’s mother Carrie.

After *Romulus* there is the second instrumental piece – *Alanson, Crooked River* – which concludes the second part of the album, closing the frames of the composition of this segment. The last side of the core *Michigan* 15-song content, Side C entitled *If you seek a Pleasant Penninsula, look about you.*, consists of four lyrical pieces and one instrumental track. Their main theme is the reflection about the state that Michigan is in, religion and its importance in the narrator’s relation to the Great Lake State, which are reflected in every composition seen there.

¹¹² R. Dombal, *op. cit.*

¹¹³ B. Garcia, *Romulus and Remus*, Ancient History Encyclopedia, http://www.ancient.eu/Romulus_and_Remus/ (24.06.2015).

The main theme behind *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie* can be found in *the Legend of Sleeping Bear*, the story of the Chippewa tribe describing the creation of the Sleeping Bear Dunes and two islands on Lake Michigan – North Manitou and South Manitou. According to the legend, once there was a great fire on the shore of Lake Michigan in the area of today’s Wisconsin. In order to escape, a mother bear and her two cubs tried to swim to the other shore, to Michigan, but eventually cubs lagged behind. As the mother bear reached the beach, she waited for them, but they drowned in the sight of the shore. In order to commemorate the place of the cubs’ death, The Great Spirit created two islands, put mother bear to sleep, and covered her with sand (hence dunes) to keep her warm. Since then, she watches after her cubs from underneath the Sleeping Bear Dunes.¹¹⁴ There are, of course, various version of this tale, because of the Indian’s oral tradition of storytelling, but the changes are cosmetic, and the main plot stays the same. The first stanza of the song in question makes a clear reference to it: “Oh Sleeping Bear! / Ran to the top and got scared / of what I could see.” It can be analyzed in the context of the legend (a mother bear being scared of seeing her cubs drowned), but also the height of the Sleeping Bear Dunes which are 150 feet tall (over 45 meters), and the fear of looking down. In the second stanza the narrator calls upon the Lamb of God, to reveal his greater plan hidden within this event. The next segment of lyrics is extraordinary, because it mentions a place outside of Michigan – the Sturgeon Bay of Wisconsin. It is the probable location from where mother bear and her cubs departed in the Indian legend, because of its location on the exact opposite shore of the Great Lake as seen from the Sleeping Bear Dunes. The Bay is depicted as “Covered completely in sand / And covered in sun”, which can be considered as reference to a great fire from the Chippewa tale. The last, fourth stanza begins with a call to Saint Marie – titular Sault Saint Marie (in fact spelled Sault Ste. Marie), a city at the American-Canadian border, famous for having the Soo Locks, a canal enabling ships to travel from the Lake Superior to other Great Lakes, and having the average pass of 10 000 ships per year.¹¹⁵ The narrator tells the city to “[...] Give up / the rocking boats

114 K. Wargin, *The Legend of Sleeping Bear*, Chelsea, MI: Sleeping Bear Press 1998, p. 13-48.

115 M. Miller, *Must See Video of the Famous Soo Locks*, A Healthier Michigan, <http://www.ahealthiermichigan.org/2014/09/18/must-see-video-of-the-famous-soo-locks/> (27.06.2015).

drowned. / The Captain is done.”, which is a reference to the large amount of shipwrecks located near Sault Ste. Marie, as well as the grief of the mother bear. *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie* is the exceptional example on the *Michigan* LP, which tells a local legend with multiple allusions to other important places and facts about this state. It can be also considered as the reinterpretation and adaptation of the story into alternative reality, expanding its content to other places and contexts. Stevens make his listeners think of Michigan as rich in folk legends, history, and interesting locations.

The next song on the album, *They Also Mourn Who Do Not Wear Black (For the Homeless in Muskegon)* has the longest lyrics on the album, and can be categorized as very similar to *Say Yes! to Michigan!*. Just like in that case, one can encounter the author’s strong statement about the need for change, but with a different approach. The main message of the lyrics is that one must not deny or rebuke grief and mourning, there is a time for that, one has to let it show and not be ashamed of it, because it can strengthen people, not destroy them. The narrator also states that politicians, senators and diplomats are not honest in their demands, and to be better than them one has to be selfless, not look for recognition, but do their own work. The last stanza emphasizes the point that people cannot “reprimand misgivings”, because if they will, “We won’t grow. / We will not ever know” and there will be no change for the better. Just like in every song of the Side C, there is vivid religious theme in the context. In the case of *They Also Mourn...*, the lyrics are based on Matthew 6:1-34, and its first verse can be considered as the key to the rest: “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”¹¹⁶ The Gospel later mentions the “hypocrites” who want to be recognized for their work – these are the politicians, senators and diplomats from the lyrics. The song tells the listener that the mourning, even hidden, cannot destroy a person, but if acknowledged can strengthen one, and let them eventually overcome it. In addition, when one will not concentrate on it, but on work, learning from mistakes, as well as being selfless in all of their endeavors, then the things can become better – “Ever will we conquer grief / and find it faster to resolve / the dead, to be absolved / and fed, to restore.” When it comes to allusions to the

¹¹⁶ *Matthew 6:1-34* [in:] *Bible (New International Version)*, Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6> (27.06.2015).

state of Michigan, there is only one, and not in the lyrics, but in title, where it is suggested that the composition is about and dedicated to the “Homeless in Muskegon”. This shows the listener that there is a problem of homelessness in Michigan (especially in the city of Muskegon), a mourning atmosphere, but also that an optimistic way of thinking about the future can be seen, a hopeful feeling. It can be seen particularly in the verses “We love you. We Chose to. We made to. We love you.” in which Stevens shows that no matter what, there is always a place for selflessness, righteousness, and love.

There is a direct allusion to religious themes in the following composition – *Oh God, Where Are You Now? (In Pickeral Lake? Pigeon? Marquette? Mackinaw?)* or as seen in the CD booklet and on the vinyl packaging *Oh God, Where Are You Now? (In Lake St. Claire? Dearborn Heights? Hamtramck?)*. First title mentions locations outside of Detroit, second one within the metropolitan area of the Motor City, but there are no references to any of them in the text. Lyrics are written from a first perspective of Christ, who is praying to his Father. The location of this event can be placed in both – garden of Gethsemane, right before the capture of Jesus in Jerusalem, or on the cross, in his moment of dying. The title is a direct reference to Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, where Christ says dying on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”.¹¹⁷ Stevens enters the Christ’s perspective and expresses the doubt and fear. He knows that he can find relief in God (“Oh God, hold me now”), especially when experiencing a life crisis (“The devil is hard on my face again. / The world is a hundred to one again.”). Similarly to Christ’s fears about the future in Matthew 26:39¹¹⁸, the author expresses his feelings in the verses “Would the righteous still remain? / Would my body stay the same?”, and he knows that God is the only one in whom the author can trust – “There’s no other man / who could raise the dead. / So do what you can / to anoint my head.”, just like in Matthew 26:42, when Christ prays “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done”.¹¹⁹ It is crucial to have in mind that the lyrics ends with uncertainty, with the same words that the song began with – “Oh God hold me now. / Oh Lord touch me now.” which expresses the ongoing struggle

¹¹⁷ *Matthew 27:46* [in:] *Bible (New International Version)*, Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+27&version=NIV> (27.06.2015).

¹¹⁸ *Matthew 26* [in:] *Bible (New International Version)*, Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+26&version=NIV> (27.06.2015).

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

of narrator – author / Christ. The composition expresses a loss of hope, an uncertainty, and abandonment of God, who may be watching over the narrator, but be present only in all these places marked in both versions of titles. The struggle with faith, both in religious and everyday life (success, hope, better living etc.) terms can be recognized here. It can also be interpreted as a reflection of the depressing atmosphere present within the community of Michigan, concentrating on both Detroit and other parts of the state, without any closure of a happy ending.

This kind of atmosphere is continued with *Redford (For Yia-Yia & Pappou)*. Redford Charter Township, a suburb of Detroit, was the place where presumably Stevens's grandparents lived.¹²⁰ Having in mind that the author's mother's parents were Greek¹²¹, hence the words "Yia-Yia" and "Pappou", which means grandma and grandpa in this language. This composition does not have any lyrics on which one could base these observations. However, it plays an important role of being an introduction to the last song on the album.

The album is concluded with a composition *Vito's Ordination Song*. The eponymous "Vito" is Thomas Vito Aiuto, Stevens's friend who collaborated on the album by singing on this song with his wife Monique. He is a Western Michigan University and Princeton Theological Seminary graduate, and a pastor of Resurrection Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, New York City, NY. Aiuto and his wife also formed The Welcome Wagon, a folk band, with which he released a of couple albums.¹²² The song is a clear reference to his "ordination", and even though it does not contain any mention of Michigan, it closes this concept album. It is more of a conclusion of the religious themes that can be seen there, a universal ending that brings closure to the project. The main interpretation of this song's lyrics is that it is a rendition of Psalm 139, where David praises the omnipresence of God, his strength as the only God there, his knowledge of the future and the ability to control it.¹²³ *Vito's Ordi-*

¹²⁰ *Redford (For Yia-Yia & Pappou) lyrics – Sufjan Stevens*, Rap Genius, <http://genius.com/Sufjan-stevens-redford-for-yia-yia-and-pappou-lyrics#> (25.06.2015).

¹²¹ C. McLean, *Liturgical sounds for restaurant place-mats*, The Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandjazzmusic/3654119/Liturgical-sounds-for-restaurant-place-mats.html> (25.06.2015).

¹²² *Our Staff – Vito Aiuto: Lead Pastor*, Resurrection Williamsburg, <http://resurrection-williamsburg.org/our-story-2/our-staff/> (27.06.2015).

¹²³ *Psalm 139* [in:] *Bible (New International Version)*, Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+139&version=NIV> (27.06.2015).

nation Song is written from a different perspective – God’s. Narrator tells that “I always knew you.” “I’ve an idea placed in your mind / To be a better man.” “And when you write a poem, / I know the words, I know the sounds / Before you write it down.”, which suggests that everything is God’s plan, to whom the laws of time do not apply. There is also a clear reference to Christ coming to Earth in a form of human as seen in John 1:14¹²⁴, and in the song’s verses: “When you wear your clothes, / I wear them too, I wear your shoes. And your jacket too.” There are also multiple other allusions to various parts of the Bible, but the most important part of the lyrics that must be noted are the last four verses, which read: “I’ve made amends, between father and son. / Or if you haven’t one:”; and two other that are repeated until the end of song: “Rest in my arms. Sleep in my bed. There’s a design to what I did and said.” The narrator’s message is that no matter what, God will take care of people and events, there is only the need of entrusting oneself to him. The last two verses also highlight the optimistic vision of the future, that eventually everything will fall in line, because of the greater plan and the feeling of relying on each other, which also fits in the theme of the atmosphere of the strong community in Michigan mentioned multiple times throughout the *Michigan LP*.

This song concludes the CD version of the album, but the two-disc vinyl version has an additional side entitled *The Great Lake State*. which consists of four additional songs which did not fit into the album. There could be multiple reasons for that: a lower artistic value in the eyes of author, different themes, space saving issues, not fitting into the general concept, etc. The key to interpretation of those composition could also be seen at Stevens’s old website dedicated to the *Michigan LP*, where he gave clues about the main topics of the bonus outtakes.¹²⁵

The first one of the side, *Marching Band*, is about the end of the world when “[...] the trees / began a trumpet sound.” “People died—and people / risen—everywhere.” that was happening in the yard of narrator’s home. After everything ended, spectators “[...] returned / and set the table by the door.” According to the song’s title, it is the description of a parade with a marching band, that felt so overwhelming as it was the end of the world. There is also an additional stanza, which is not sung during the song, but is included in

¹²⁴ *John 1:14* [in:] *Bible (New International Version)*, Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+1&version=NIV> (27.06.2015).

¹²⁵ *MP3 Outtakes from Michigan*, Sufjan.com, <http://web.archive.org/web/20030926014446/>, <http://www.sufjan.com/michigan/outtakes.html> (27.06.2015).

the packaging. It has very different theme than the core lyrics, but also can be interpreted as a childhood story. Both of them do not have any references to the state of Michigan whatsoever.

The choice of *Niagara Falls* to be included on the album, whose main theme is the Great Lake State may not be immediately clear, but after reading the note on Stevens's old website, it becomes so – “Because Canada and Michigan share borders, much of my experience in Michigan is closely associated with Canada. Family reunions in Windsor. Vacations in Wa Wa. Road trips to New York through Niagara Falls, which I've been to nearly 25 times.”¹²⁶ Having this in consideration, the song is about the author's trip with his family to the titular place, where he had seen beautiful landscapes (“From the top of the mountain / you could see Lake Erie, / Niagara Falls.”), and played with his companions (“Driving through the line. / We pretend we were from / Africa.”).

Another of Stevens's childhood stories can be found in the *Pickereel Lake* lyrics, where he depicts a time when he lived near the titular Pickereel Lake¹²⁷ with his family. This interpretation is approved by the artist's own notes on his page, where he has written that it is about “living in a cramped trailer home [...] near Pickereel Lake, Michigan. Our mother kept buying animals [...]. There were more animals than people.” A distinct motif of teenage angst can be seen in verses “I wasn't willing / To fight on the floor / Throwing the chairs through the door. [...] / And I wasn't willing / to make up the bed, folding the sheets / to your head” among others. Apart from that, the artist remembers the storms that destroyed nearby trees and killed some of the animals that his mother kept, but there are no characteristic elements of Michigan that could participate in constructing its image.

With *Presidents & Magistrates* the main theme of Side D radically changes – from childhood stories to general remarks. It is another song that does not refer to Michigan in lyrics or in title. Stevens explained its meaning as being “about voting for the losing candidate” and his experience of doing so in every election that he participated in. It is reflected in song's verses “If I'm alone in saying “yes.” / I'll change my views and try my best. / Peace to me [...]”.

¹²⁶ Ibidem.

¹²⁷ There are numerous Pickereel Lakes in Michigan, so one cannot tell of which narrator is speaking of, but it is highly probable that one in question is Pickereel Lake placed near Petoskey, MI, where Stevens lived with his family.

Wolverine is the last composition on the LP version of the album in question. The author himself stated that his “[...] sister taught at a small school in Wolverine, Michigan, where it was popular to for teenage girls to get pregnant. They brought their children to school and showed them off like letters on varsity jackets”, but there can be other interpretations to this song. First of all, Wolverine is the nickname of the whole state, which means that this track may have a more general overtone. There are only seven verses, which are “Wolverine homecoming queen / took the train to Pickerel Lake. / It’s not your fault. / It’s sold and bought. / Take it in stride. / Take it—it’s dry. / It’s not your fault.” Apart from the “homecoming queen” being young mother, the whole Great Lake State can be the addressee. In this context, it can be read as referring to accepting difficult life situations and dealing with them calmly (“Take it in stride.”), which is supported in the verse “It’s not your fault.” that gains an additional meaning of Michigan (and its community) not being guilty of its current situation.

4.3. The Most Frequently Used Themes

In order to receive the best overall view of an album, one has to explore lyrics not solely in the direct matter, but also analyze its content in terms of themes that the author used most frequently to deliver his message. After individual research of every composition, one is provided with essential pieces of information about each song, but still lacks the holistic view of the concept. An analysis of themes that a consumer encounters throughout the *Michigan* LP will definitely help with the more in-depth study of the topic that this work is focused on – the construction of an image.

Building the view of the state by the author is not designed to be delivered by one composition at a time. In works like Stevens’s release, that is a classic example of a concept album, the transmission of vital information is underway during the process of listening to the whole work holistically. Just like in this type of musical recordings, all of the lyrics included in it have to be considered as one – one song may be about one particular place, or city, but only the whole album can depict the state of Michigan.

By using different themes in this LP, Stevens creates a specific impression of his home state, emphasizing society, religion, nature, industrialism, history etc. The choice of particular issues offers the listener some significant information – what is important for Stevens himself, what is important to the

community that the author was living in, and what is important for Michigan as a whole. Therefore, an analysis of the themes will get the researcher closer to exploring a more complex image of the Great Lake State and what factors affect the process of constructing it.

In order to do so, one has to concentrate on five of the most commonly used themes in *Michigan*, which are themes of history and reality, nature, social issues and politics, personal reflections, and religion. By understanding how these are used, what role do they have, to what extent they influence a consumer's view of the state and how they accomplish that goal.

4.3.1. Theme of History and Reality

While researching *Michigan* in the context of local history, it is obvious that the way in which author is depicting state's history and reality on the album is absolutely crucial for this study to be complete. There are numerous examples of compositions that explore these topics on Stevens's album, and with different approaches, but the most common is not a direct narration that tells the consumer about particular location's past, but rather one that confronts the past through a commentary on what the artist encountered in his childhood or in the present times. It also has to be remembered that through history of one particular place, and the exploration of that topic, a listener constructs the overall image of a place.

A proper example of such attitudes can be seen in the opening track – *Flint (For the Unemployed and Underpaid)* where Stevens writes that the narrator lost his job, lost his room, that he is driving to the riverside, and it's the same outside. Even right at the beginning the artist draws the consumer's attention to what is extremely vital in the context of the state's history, not necessary a positive side of it. The author wants to highlight that the unemployment and underpayment played and still is playing an important role in Michigan's history and reality. *Detroit, Lift Up Your Weary Head! (Rebuild! Restore! Reconsider!)* has similar features in terms of emphasizing issues that were and are important for Michigan. Just like in the previous case, the lyrics show that Detroit was "once a great place" and is "now a prison". In both examples, what one may read from the lyrics in the context of history and reality of the Great Lake State is the importance of industrialism. With the basic knowledge about these two cities, the recipient can encode the message that Stevens sends – that the industry was once thriving in this state, but now,

when it is collapsing, things are getting worse, which affects the society and the living conditions.

This song also represents another attitude towards depicting history and reality on this album – not only highlighting important issues, but also portraying the specificity of particular places. Stevens emphasizes the unfriendliness of Detroit using the phrase “now a prison” and “from the trembling walls”, but the most important part of the composition in terms of characteristic elements of the city is the middle section of the track with sixteen different components of the city’s past and present landscape. This artistic measure gives the recipient an impression of being at a brief history lesson that the author provides, giving clues to the most important moments in city’s history. It includes the prominent figure of “Henry Ford” at the beginning, followed by Motor City’s features like “Public Trans”, “City Hall”, “Windsor Park”, or “Auto Cars”, places “Pontiac”, “Saginaw”, or “Iroquois”, mentioning also the problematic issues like “Feed the poor”, “After Dark”, or “Unemployment”. All of these contribute to constructing a very characteristic image of Detroit, which is based on its history and reality. However, because of the lack of description of these features, the consumer is forced to interpret them, and with a very pessimistic first stanza, it is suggested that the overall image may not be positive.

It is even more clear when one takes the back cover essay into consideration, in which, in terms of history, Detroit is the focus. There are multiple references to the city’s history, its great glory in the 20th century, and its contemporary declining status. Just like in the lyrics of the song devoted to the Motor City, there are multiple allusions to its famous locations and features, and it is implied that their splendor has passed, which makes the essay more straightforward in this section.

The seventh track on this LP – *Holland* – is also important in terms of this type of a commentary on history and reality. Just like in *Detroit...* the narrator presents some of the most prominent features of the city. Having in mind the overall meaning of the song, a college life seems to be the central activity in this coastal town, but apart from that, the artist speaks of a few others in the second stanza: “Sleeping on Lake Michigan / Factories and marching bands”, which once again highlights the most noticeable elements of the Michigan’s landscape – the Great Lake (but also lakes in general) and the industry. The theme of marching bands also appears frequently throughout the LP, so one may assume that it is also an important element of the local culture and tradition.

Besides emphasizing the issues and landmarks of particular places, history and reality of Michigan is depicted also through characteristics of the whole state, with the best example in the song *Say Yes! to Mich!gan!*. There are numerous references to the specificity of this state throughout lyrics, such as “Still I know what / to wear on my back: / Michigan! / Ponsheuaing! / Cadillac!”. The third stanza can be considered as the best example of this idea, in which one can read: “If the lakes took / the place of the sea. / If the cars drove / themselves, way to be! / Opposite to the trains moving in / Rivers run interstate, Michigan!”. It is a clear promotion of the Wolverine State through highlighting its features and landmarks, which maybe are not considered the most popular, but those with which the author has the strongest bond. Reality is here depicted as optimistic, history and tradition as something to be proud of – an example of local patriotism despite being critical about its condition which can be seen in the other tracks’ lyrics.

An illustration of this attitude is present in the fifth composition on the LP – *The Upper Peninsula*, where Stevens focuses on the reality of life in this part of state. As explored before, a depressing atmosphere is felt in every stanza, but the relation between the first and second one is interesting in terms of how the narrator’s view of living in Michigan can be interpreted by the listener. The song begins with a declaration “I live in America / with a pair of Payless shoes / The Upper Peninsula / and the television news.” that can be seen as some kind of a local patriotism, a self-identification with the region. However, the second one depicts the Upper Peninsula as an unfriendly, cold place at the end of the world with large amounts of snow. There is no theme of history, but one can think of this region as being lost in time, an exemplification not only of reality seen there, but in all of United States, and despite that the author is able to be proud of living there.

There is also one another approach to these themes that Stevens uses on the *Michigan* LP – a reinterpretation and adaptation of the existing folklore themes that contributed to the state’s history. The song that exemplifies this style is *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie*, which puts *The Legend of Sleeping Bear*, a popular local story, into a different context, and makes its meaning more ambiguous. The usage of the Chippewa tale in *Michigan* can be seen as a tribute to the Indian tribes that once inhabited these lands, as well as an homage to a story that Stevens himself grew up with. Either way, this composition explores the theme of local folklore and history in the most direct

way on the entire album, marking the importance of the Ojibway tribes, local legends, childhood stories, scenic sites, significance of religion, as well as the prominence of Sault Ste. Marie city and its features. In the twelve verses, the author reinvents the legend in question, adapts it for the purposes of his concept album and tells a great deal of vital details about Michigan's history.

By making multiple references to relevant places, communities, events, and the reality of Michigan, Stevens constructs its history, as well as tells a story of a place that is relevant to him. He approaches the state's past in different ways, making allusions directly, through a personal story, adapting a local legend, or making a statement about his patriotism and criticism. It is absolutely instrumental to have in mind that the interpretation of Michigan's history which one can see on this LP, is based on Stevens's personal experience. Obviously, he did not try to create an objective history book that would describe every significant moment of the Wolverine State's timeline. The omission of several crucial topics is present and easily noticed, which will be discussed in the last part of this work. Nevertheless, Stevens addresses the issues and tells the stories that may appear to be relevant in some way to him personally, without any objectivity in choice whatsoever. In this sense, history plays an important role in *Michigan*, not only in terms of research, or documenting and preserving, but also due to providing a feeling of listening to stories about the real place, to which a recipient can relate to, or can imagine its reality.

4.3.2. Theme of Nature

The second main theme that has to be mentioned is nature. The visual design emphasizes it in great extent, so it is automatically considered by the consumer as the topic that will potentially be used widely in the textual layer. Lyrics don't often reference lakes, rivers, snow, sand, or animals, but one can encounter a snippet of each in almost every song. There are only a few songs that explore this topic as the main one, while most of them consider nature as a background to other events.

This process can be seen in *The Upper Peninsula* where the narrator has a "snow mobile, [his] car", in *Say Yes! to M!ch!gan!* in which the author says that "If the lakes took / the place of the sea." and "Rivers run interstate, Michigan!". Similar examples can be seen in *Holland* – "Sleeping on Lake Michigan / Factories and marching bands"; even in *Detroit, Lift Up...* – "Windsor Park. Windsor Park"; in *They Also Mourn...* – "Since the water made it, / most to sail

it, / made it most to song, it made it most to song.”; in *Niagara Falls* – “From the top of the mountain / You could see Lake Erie, / Niagara Falls [...]”; or in *Wolverine* – “[...] took the train to Pickerel Lake.” There are also some minor references to this theme in the songs’ titles like *Oh God, Where Are You Now?* (*In Pickerel Lake? Pigeon? Marquette? Mackinaw?*), or *Pickerel Lake*.

In addition to these examples, there are also two compositions that are devoted to nature in full – *Tahquamenon Falls* and *Alanson, Crooked River*. Unfortunately, those do not have any lyrics, but their titles suggest that they are inspired by and focused on those sites. One could also consider *Sleeping Bear*, *Sault Saint Marie* as being about nature in full, because of its mention of one of Michigan’s most popular scenic landmarks, and animals that are rooted in the local tradition. However, while this track’s topic may emphasize those elements of the Great Lake State, there are almost no direct references to nature with a few exemptions like “Oh Sleeping Bear!”, “Covered completely in sand / and covered in sun.”, and “Oh Saint Marie! Give up / the rocking boats drowned.”

One also cannot forget about the back cover essay where some significant mentions of this theme are to be found. It is interesting that most of the references to nature are placed right at the beginning, in the first paragraph, which the author begins with a couple of sentences emphasizing the natural landscape of this state – “Welcome to Michigan! The waterways and waterfalls! Soo Locks, state parks and Walloon Lake. The apple farms and cherry blossoms and two striking peninsulas bordering four Great Lakes!” etc.

Despite that, the lack of references to nature within the lyrical layer of *Michigan* LP can be surprising, especially when it can be considered as the main topic of visual layer of the album and many references to it in back cover essay, where, among others, the most representative animals, water basins, and features of landscape are placed. This artistic measure can be interpreted as devoting each part of the LP to a different main theme, where texts serve only as an addition to the graphics when it comes to nature, meanwhile talking about different issues.

4.3.3. Theme of Social Issues and Politics

While the theme of nature might have been overlooked in the textual layer of *Michigan*, social issues, and even some elements of politics can be found easily through the whole album and its packaging. This is obviously strictly connected to the commentary about the state’s reality and its communities, but apart

from making general remarks, the author also focuses directly on particular problems and depicts them in a very specific way.

First of all, one has to point out two compositions that play the most important role in representing social issues on the *Michigan LP – Flint (For the Unemployed and Underpaid)* and *Detroit, Lift Up Your Weary Head! (Rebuild! Restore! Reconsider!)*. It is clear, even only by looking at the titles, that these are heavily influenced by the author's view of the state's problems. In the first case the dedication implies the support for the neediest, and in the second, the urge to restore Detroit's glory by changing the way people are behaving.

Flint... mostly emphasizes the titular "Unemployed and Underpaid" who "lost [his] job and lost [his] room", which highlights these issues. There is also a distinct motif of trying the hardest to make the narrator's life better, but it is suggested that it does not work. The song is written in a first person perspective, which strengthens the message, and forces the recipients to sympathize with the main character. It does not speak directly about the possible political actions that have been, or might be undertaken to solve these problematic issues, but in general it recommends some kind of action in order to end the suffering present in narrator's life.

A more straightforward approach can be encountered in *Detroit...* where the author directly addresses some of the authorities' decision: "People Mover: Bad Decision", or "From the trembling walls. It's a great idea! / [...] From the Renaissance. It's a great idea!" (having in mind possible sarcasm). By naming the Motor City "Now a prison." The narrator implies that he is criticizing its present state, which fits into the scheme of a negative attitude towards people who are responsible for this action. Also, only by reading the lyrics, one may find out what political approach Stevens himself approves – "Feed the poor. Feed the poor.", "Industry. Industry.", "Unemployed. Unemployed.", "Gun Control. Gun Control.", "Public Trans. Public Trans.", or "Auto Cars. Auto Cars." may indicate a more left-wing line, but cannot be stated definitively.

In the back cover essay, the author seems to explore the state of Detroit in an even greater detail. Besides highlighting the effects of its decline, he also marks some of the unfortunate actions that were undertaken in the Motor City: "You have grown with industry, car factories, riots, raids, transportation nightmares. [...] You have built magnificent buildings only to burn them."; and in another paragraph: "Oh Detroit, what have you done to city hall, the public trains, the workers' union [...]. When you are dead and gone,

who will care for your children's children. They have run wild with bastard boys around the streets, reckless car rides downtown, [...] drug taking, knife-stabbing [...]. They have been out of their minds. They have been left with nothing." He acknowledges that particular events and problems of the local society that lead to the decline of the city, and states that they have to be, as in song's title, "reconsidered". There is very little optimism about the state of Detroit at the time of the album's release, it can only be found in the future based on the community working together to bring this city to its old form. This community, of course, also has many problems, but as Stevens writes in the following quote, it all may be improved by faith and goodness of the people: "Have you lost your father to disease, to war, to alcohol, drugs, a car accident? Nothing can replace them. [...] it is our hard task to welcome the widows, the children, the orphans, the fatherless into our family."

There are also some minor references to social issues and politics in other songs, but none of them discuss these themes in their entirety like *Flint...* and *Detroit...* One has to mention a bonus outtake *Presidents & Magistrates* which is about voting for a losing candidate, which demonstrates an impossibility of helping to change reality. Apart from that, there are significant examples of politically engaged lyrics in songs like *All Good Naysayers*, *Speak Up! Or Forever Hold Your Peace!*, *Say Yes! to Mich!gan!* and *They Also Mourn Who Do Not Wear Black (For the Homeless in Muskegon)*. First one mostly focuses on the need for change and the blind faith in the ideas that parties represents, in contrast to the real action that has to be undertaken. The fourth song on the album explores the theme of local patriotism and the feeling of pride among the community of being Michiganian. A similar approach as in *All Good Naysayers...* is present in *They Also Mourn...*, where Stevens writes that "For the politics are not political / for what they stand, / For not what they demand. / Every senator and diplomat / combines her certain part, / A matter for the heart." This can be interpreted both as an affirmation of their selfless actions, and as doing things they want at the expense of the promises declared publicly.

However, all the three songs in question, as mentioned before, are not fully committed to politics and social issues, but rather to personal reflections. They all have elements that discuss problems that Michigan is struggling with, but do not emphasize them as the most important. In these terms, *Flint...* and *Detroit...* are the best examples of exploring Stevens's observations, anxieties, and restlessness about his home state.

4.3.4. Theme of Personal Reflections

While analyzing every case of a cultural text, a researcher has to take into consideration that the presented material is a reflection of the author's ideas, his vision of issues, society, politics, and also of particular locations. *Michigan* is no exception to that rule – as noted before, there are numerous direct messages from the author in which he expresses his views about the surrounding environment. Generally, exemplifications of Stevens's ideas are present to some extent in every composition on the album. As explained in the theoretical chapter of this paper, every work of art is subjective and is marked by its author's thoughts, so it has to be treated with distance. In fact, one can even treat every artistic work as a personal reflection, being a mirror image of ideas that a filmmaker, writer, musician, screenwriter, or even an actor wanted to convey.

Having that in mind, one could focus not on the general issue of personal reflections in the album, which are often background and function in the sub-text layer, emphasizing rather the songs that are fully committed to this theme. This categorization also may be problematic – does *Flint...*, *Detroit...* or *The Upper Peninsula* count as such, because of their highly thoughtful character?

Of course, one might consider them as such, but for the purposes of this work, it is essential to focus on the two songs that are very general, very direct, and very reflective – *All Good Naysayers, Speak Up! Or Forever Hold Your Peace!* and *They Also Mourn Who Do Not Wear Black (For the Homeless in Muskegon)*. They are both full of worldview insights, using similar rhymes and sophisticated language. It is clear that in lyrical terms these were thought as being somehow connected to each other in their forms.

The former one focuses on the need of change, action, and collective work that would make it possible. Stevens writes that the most important in communities' existence are not material purposes, but greater ideas like “love, a perfect measure!”, which help make the world better. The whole song has a rather optimistic atmosphere, in contrast to *They Also Mourn...* which concentrates on mourning, the acceptance of that state, learning from mistakes, marching on despite every adversity, and building prosperity on selflessness in spite of all opposing circumstances. Both examples present hope in the artist's vision of a future Michigan, hope that is deeply rooted in the state's troubled past and its present struggles, and which will probably not materialize if the local community does not take action.

This hope for a better future, often based on collective work of Michigani-ans is present throughout the whole album – from “I pretend to try, even if I tried alone.” in *Flint...*, and “If there’s any other way, I’ll do anything for you” in *For The Widows in Paradise, For The Fatherless In Ypsilanti*, to “Everything you want. It’s a great idea!” in *Detroit...*, and “Rest in my arms. Sleep in my bed. / There’s a design to what I did and said.” in *Vito’s Ordination Song*. The back cover essay also vividly highlights this theme in such sentences as “[...] there is a renaissance of hope.” (basically whole fifth paragraph), “The man downstairs hammering on the wall, the woman blow-drying her hair in the bathroom – these people are your family”, and most importantly “What little effort it takes – a friendly nod at the stranger on the street [...], saying hello or goodbye, opening doors [...]. In the small things, the day-to-day gestures [...] we do great work of the kingdom, which is to welcome each unlikely individual into the fold, one person at a time”. This speech about an optimistic future and the strength in peoples’ righteousness is a very representative example of the main theme of personal ideas that Stevens placed within his work.

There is also another trend that has to be mentioned in the more reflective parts of the *Michigan* LP, which is the contrast of the positive and negative views of Michigan, as well as praising and criticizing what can be seen there. The best example of admiration for the Great Lake States can be seen in the song *Say Yes! To Mich!gan!*, where the author not only writes about his homeland’s most valuable features, but also refers to them as “Golden arms”, that he “never meant to go away” from and is proud of being a part of Michigan’s community. It is the only composition on the album that is indisputably positive about the state which it is describing. Tracks like *All Good Naysayers...*, *Detroit...*, *Holland, They Also Mourn...* have elements of praise for Michigan, but there is also an accompanying negative theme. On the other hand, there are such songs like *Flint...* or *The Upper Peninsula* that spread a pessimistic image of the Wolverine State, creating a bitter-sweet effect of the author’s attitude towards it.

Nevertheless, the general image of Michigan is rather optimistic, and the author, through his thoughts and views of this state, hopes that there is bright future ahead of it. This kind of attitude gives an impression of a distance between Stevens and Michigan. Because of the lack of blind praise, shallow nostalgia, mawkish sentimentalism, or crushing criticism, a recipient may believe in the authenticity of the message, that it is not biased, or falsely constructed. This creates a sense of truthfulness and reliability of the source, that can teach

the consumer something about the state – a kind of subjective documentary with an advantage of an attractive form and a content full of first-hand reports.

4.3.5. Theme of Religion

The last theme that stands out as being one of the most frequently used in *Michigan* is one of religious connotation. Stevens is known for exploring motifs of faith and including numerous references to the Bible, Jesus Christ, and Christianity in general within his compositions. Despite some minor mentions in his debut album *A Sun Came*, this LP from 2003 about his home state can be considered as his first where he decided to include spiritual themes to such great extent, which would be even more developed in *Seven Swans* from 2004, and *Carrie & Lowell* from 2015.

First major religious theme can be heard in *For The Widows In Paradise*, *For The Fatherless in Ypsilanti*, which is written in a first person perspective of Christ who is praying in the garden of Gethsemane or while dying on the cross. It is another example of highlighting the importance of community of Michigianians and working on bettering this state.

Apart from this song, the main part of the album where one can find the references to Christian faith, is the whole side C, which is devoted to this motif. In *Sleeping Bear*, *Sault Saint Marie* the narrator addresses the “Lamb of God” to tell the Michigan residents his “perfect design”, the fate of the state’s future. On the next, twelfth composition on the LP *They Also Mourn...*, the narrator puts the idea of learning from your own mistakes and strengthening by accepting mourning in the frames of Gospel of Matthew. That makes it another reference to the importance of a community’s role in shaping the reality of Michigan. In *Oh God, Where Are You Now? (In Pickerel Lake? Pigeon? Marquette? Mackinaw?)* even the title suggests that the religion plays an essential role in this composition. While *For The Widows...* could be treated as the Christ’s prayer in Gethsemane, this song suggests moments of his dying on the cross, when he calls out to his father; however, both interpretations can be considered valid. It is implied that the only way to recover Michigan to its glory days is to have faith in God and his plan. On the other hand, this track tells a story of a struggle of faith, where the narrator (who can also be interpreted as a regular Michigianian) is wondering if God has left and does not take care of his or her homeland anymore. *Vito’s Ordination Song* has no references to Michigan, but is based on the belief

that God knows people better than anyone else, that he has a role of the protector of humanity, but foremost that he is present within every member of the community. The latter explanation of these lyrics once again amplifies the importance of the Michigianians characterized as a group of people who are relying on each other and selflessly helping one another, which is exemplified in the last two verses: “Rest in my arms. Sleep in my bed. / There’s a design to what I did and said.”

Apart from the core content of the *Michigan* LP, there are also some minor mentions of religion in the bonus outtake *Marching Band* where the narrator describes a religious depiction of the end of the world and the Second Coming. Moreover, in the back cover essay, Stevens once again highlights the importance of Christian charity, being nice to each other, helping those in need. He also references again Psalm 139, which is mentioned in *Vito’s Ordination Song*, when he writes that God has known people from the very beginning of the existence of the world, and people’s task is to find a meaning of life by doing good for the community.

In general, the theme of religion is not used to praise the belief in God, his work, or the truthfulness of the Bible. There is a feeling of uncertainty in all of the songs’ lyrics, a struggle with higher force and faith itself. The subject of religion is rather used to highlight the concept of a Christian community – the key to prosperity is through collective work built on the base of righteousness and selflessness in order to make Michigan better.

It is especially interesting that the importance of a community is not only the main motif of the religious references in *Michigan*, but it is present throughout the entire LP, within every explored theme – history, reality, society, politics, and personal reflections. Having this in mind, one could conclude that while the most frequently brought up subject in all of lyrics is reality and history, the main background theme that binds every piece of text in the album is community and the importance of the Michigianians themselves, therefore they are who constitute what the Wolverine State really is and might be.

4.4. Title-lyrics Relations

It has to be noted that the texts included in the packaging and the lyrics are not the only significant part of the textual layer of the album – songs’ titles also have to be taken into consideration and their special role in constructing the meaning of the compositions and image of Michigan. In case of Sufjan Stevens,

the song names are crucial in understanding the musician's intentions – he is known for long, often very poetic titles that often define what a composition is, and the *Michigan* LP is no exception.

Stevens takes a few different approaches in using songs' names in order to create their meanings. First and foremost, he treats them as clues for the interpretations. *Flint...* may be a perfect example for such process – one may notice that there are no references to the city of Flint or Michigan within the lyrics, but with the title of the song, a recipient understands that the artist addresses the problem of unemployment and underpayment in Flint, that may reflect the situation in the whole state. Similar situations can be seen in *They Also Mourn...* and *Oh God...*, where, by mentioning locations in Michigan, or its problems, the author suggests the connection of lyrics with the Wolverine State. Without these titles, they would have had a more general and universal meaning, not necessarily connected with Stevens's homeland. This approach can be compared to having each side of the vinyl discs titled, which are helpful in decoding general leitmotifs of all four parts of the album.

Moreover, by adding the particular names of places to the song titles, Stevens creates direct connections between the songs and locations. Even if there is no reference in the text, he forces recipients to think of a city, township, lake, or river, and makes them believe that the song reflects the true nature of these places. This is a clear example of constructing the image of Michigan, that may, or may not be true when compared to reality, but subconsciously a listener is made to think that *Flint...*, *Holland*, *Detroit...*, *Sleeping Bear*, *Sault Saint Marie*, and other's lyrics reflect problems, views, and general atmosphere of these locations.

One also has to remember about the instrumental compositions in the album, where the lyrics play an even more significant role. In all three cases – *Tahquamenon Falls*, *Alanson*, *Crooked River*, and *Redford (For Yia-Yia & Pappou)* – Stevens points out that these tracks have a particular theme, that they tell a specific story about places he names. The sixth and tenth compositions' titles refer only to water basins – there is no commentary, suggestion, criticism or praise within names, which redirects a listener to the musical layer to focus on it more in order to discover its meaning. With *Redford (For Yia-Yia & Pappou)* the situation is slightly different, having in mind the dedication to Stevens's grandparents that gives a recipient the idea of a probable nostalgic, sentimental, and rather reflective tone of the composition, which is even more

highlighted by the main theme of the third side of the vinyl version of the LP that emphasizes religion and personal reflections.

Poeticism of titles plays a significant role in decoding songs' meaning, not only in terms of being a presentation of the main topic of the lyrics, but also often being the key to the interpretation, setting the tone for them by mentioning locations, people, issues etc. Having that in mind, one has to focus on their function in constructing the images of places in Michigan. As mentioned before, titles suggest that the songs' lyrics are about particular places in the state, even if the singer does not refer to it during the track. By adding that fact to the interpretation of each composition's lyrics, the titles of the LP sides, main themes, and remembering the role of the back cover essay, a researcher can be closer to fully understanding how an image of Michigan is created throughout the album. Only by taking into consideration every aspect of the textual layer in the album, both consumers and academics can be closer to realizing the artistic process and ideas behind *Michigan*.

Of course, the final interpretation can radically differ from the original concept that Sufjan Stevens had during the recording sessions, but the process of constructing an image might have been both intentional and unintentional, which makes this study not about trying to figure out what the author had in mind, but in fact understanding how his work can influence the recipients' view of the state of Michigan.

4.5. Usage of Symbolism and Allusions to the State of Michigan

It is important to devote the last subchapter of this part of the LP's textual layer analysis to the usage of the Wolverine State's symbols and allusions to it, which Stevens's lyrics are full of. Their role in constructing the state's image is absolutely essential, and it has to be highlighted as one of the most important features of this process.

First of all, one has to acknowledge that by presenting songs that were directly created to tell stories about Michigan, Stevens constructs an impression of the LP being a documental album. It depends on the level of a consumer's familiarity with the Wolverine state to verify messages within lyrics, but nevertheless, by presenting such a great number of pieces of information concerning Michigan, it is highly probable that the listener's first impression is to approach these songs with an assumption of their truthfulness. Moreover, this effect is even stronger when a consumer takes into consideration the visu-

al design that also presents numerous Michigan symbols and connections to this state. The *Michigan* LP strikes its audience as being a competent resource of study on this region, its features, issues, community etc. regardless of its real academic value, which is questionable due to its artistic character.

This impression is strengthened by the specific narration. Many of the lyrics are presumed to be written from a first person perspective, presenting ideas of a Michiganiaan who tells stories about his community, sometimes even from within it. That strategy builds the credibility of depicted events, as well as a reliability of the narrator himself. In addition to this, the majority of the composition's lyrics are written as if they could be interpreted as biographical or semi-biographical. Songs like *Flint...*, *For the Widows...*, *The Upper Peninsula*, or *Romulus* includes very frequent usage of the first perspective word "I", as well as connotations to Stevens's life. Using references to events that are relevant to the presumed Michiganiaan and told by him, drawn from his own experience, makes a consumer believe that the lyrics can be considered as a reliable source of local history.

That conclusion can bring one to an analysis of two types of this LP's attractiveness – that appealing to the residents of Michigan, and to people who know this state second-hand. References to symbols that are deeply rooted in local history or everyday life of the Great Lake State, just like specific narrations and themes, play an important role in building an impression of the album made by a native, a person that is connected to this state, knows a lot about its landscape and people. When a person who was brought up and living in Michigan, who identifies with it, listens to this LP, it appears to be something that they can relate to as being about themselves and their communities – an album by Michiganiaans, for Michiganiaans, about Michiganiaans. An exploration of themes that are not famous or popular outside of the Wolverine State can be treated as some kind of a test of affiliation to this place – the author knows inconspicuous and unknown trivialities about it, so he has to be credible, reliable and trustworthy in his message.

On the other hand, when it comes to people who do not consider themselves Michiganiaans, rarely visit this state, or never encountered it in person, the situation is more complex. As explained before, by using references to the state, its symbolism, history, issues etc., Stevens makes his music appealing as a work of almost academic nature. A listener could see in such a strategy the potential of learning about Michigan by just listening to music, or as a starting

Part II

point to a more in-depth research, just like in the case of this paper. Moreover, exploring themes that could be found on this LP leads to studying the American culture as a whole, its characteristics, history, and important issues. This can be especially engaging for non-American citizens, who would like to learn something about a foreign country, or just explore the local history and reality of the state of Michigan.

The lyrics plays an extremely important role in appealing to Michigani-ans, Americans interested in specificity of one of their homeland's states, and foreigners. Allusions to this particular place and usage of symbols build the credibility of the author as a person who has the appropriate knowledge and qualifications to create such an LP. Despite the issue of accuracy, impartiality and representativeness of the pieces of information presented within textual layer of *Michigan*, it may seem to be an extremely attractive local history case, with a potential of having characteristics of educational value that gives this music album the potential of further academic exploration.

5. Chapter Five: Music

The third layer of any LP that contributes to its overall image is music, which along with the visual design and texts constitutes the core of its content. It is important to note that any of the parts are equally important. Despite the fact that the analyzed material has a form of a music album, the texts (both the lyrics and the packaging scriptures) and the visual design create the LP as a whole in the same proportion. Nevertheless, it is the sound that serves as its base and connects all of these elements. Martin Mull once said (although this quotation is attributed to many others including Frank Zappa and Elvis Costello) that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture”¹²⁸, still it is extremely important to focus on what sounds of *Michigan* can communicate and what meaning they have.

One of the main problems when analyzing the musical content of an album is the decision of choosing the right methodology of the research. John Covach, the Director of the University of Rochester Institute for Popular Music, in his article *Popular Music, Unpopular Musicology* writes that there is a problem in the academic approach to studying popular music. Musicologists tend to ignore works of that nature, especially rock and country and western, without regard to its important role in shaping the culture. Richard Middleton in his *Studying Popular Music* goes even further stating that “as a general rule works of musicology, theoretical or historical, act as though popular music did not exist. Sometimes it is explicitly condemned [...]; and sometimes it is patronized: all right in its way [...] but not worth *serious* attention.”¹²⁹ On the other hand, Covach writes that popular music has “received considerable attention from scholars outside the field of musicology.” These researchers are mostly cultural critics and sociologists without musicological skills, which forces them to analyze the material in a different way, focusing on the “effect of musics on listeners, and on the ways in which musics can have various kinds of significance within cultures and subcultures [...]” Simplifying the issue, Covach writes that the whole problem can be generalized to the issue of distinction between the text and the context – “[...] the musicologist is primarily

128 G. O’Toole, *Writing About Music is Like Dancing About Architecture*, Quote Investigator, <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/11/08/writing-about-music/> (27.06.2015).

129 R. Middleton, *Studying popular music*, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom: Open University Press 1990, p. 103.

concerned with musical texts, while the sociologist is concerned principally with social, economic, and political contexts.”¹³⁰

When it comes to the analysis of the *Michigan* LP’s content, a more appropriate approach is the second one, typical for researchers interested in cultural studies. To define in what ways Stevens constructs the image of his home state it is necessary to take into consideration what music has to offer in its context, and not in the typical musicological way.

In the light of both of these two methodologies, the music itself can be a valuable source of information about the messages that author wanted to convey. Music has a potential to imitate the sounds of nature, city life, community, etc., but also can refer other stylistics that can be essential in decoding a general meaning of a song. There are multiple examples of these artistic measures, such as: Kraftwerk’s *Radioactivity* where “S.O.S”, “radioactivity” and “is in the air for you and me” are repeated in Morse’s code throughout the composition, which is the illustration of the band’s criticism of the world’s nuclear activity¹³¹; usage of a sliding guitar in Foo Fighters’ song *Congregation* that indicates its connection to the Nashville music scene¹³²; multiple references to the American West Coast pop in Daft Punk’s album *Random Access Memories*¹³³, aggressive riffs of Rage Against the Machine that highlight the rebellious lyrics; or the sound of a train at the end of The Beach Boys’ *Caroline, No* which can be interpreted as the loss of innocence which is the main theme of this composition¹³⁴; and many more.

In the case of *Michigan* the potential of conveying messages by music is as high as in the previously presented examples. In fact, taking into consider-

¹³⁰ J. Covach, “Popular Music, Unpopular Musicology,” [in:] *Rethinking Music*, N. Cook, M. Everist, eds., Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press 1999, p. 454-55.

¹³¹ serverbot, *Radioaktivität – Kraftwerk*, Crazy Cosmic Jive, <http://shadowson-yourwall.blogspot.com/2009/04/radioaktivitat-kraftwerk.html> (27.06.2015).

¹³² K. Grow, *Hear Foo Fighters’ Rowdy*, *Nashville-Inspired Song ‘Congregation’*, Rolling Stone, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/hear-foo-fighters-rowdy-nashville-inspired-song-congregation-20141031> (27.06.2015).

¹³³ A. Young, *Todd Edwards says new Daft Punk album features “West Coast vibe,” uses live instruments*, Consequence of Sound, <http://consequenceofsound.net/2013/04/todd-edwards-says-new-daft-punk-album-features-west-coast-vibe-uses-live-instruments/> (27.06.2015).

¹³⁴ *The Beach Boys Pet Sounds Track Notes*, Beach Boys Fan Club, <http://www.beach-boysfanclub.com/ps-tracks.html> (27.06.2015).

ation the overall character of this LP, there is a significant probability of treating the sounds as another way to encode messages Stevens used to construct the image of Wolverine State. Having in mind the characteristics of Michigan – its industrialism, the importance of Motown Records, the extremely large quantity of the water basins, as well as poverty, car manufactories etc. – there are various opportunities that the author has to include these issues in the form of sounds. What is interesting, the case of music in *Michigan* album is not obvious and trivial, which is mainly because Stevens rarely reflects these issues in his music.

This way of thinking confirms that approach of a “context” analysis in the words of John Covach¹³⁵ can be more effective in finding out what image of Michigan Stevens constructs. By treating the *Michigan* LP as a cultural text that can convey messages about society, its history, and characteristics, a researcher can find the methods of the author’s process of building his picture of this location, just like in the example of the visual design and texts – how he perceives his state, what is most important for him, on what features of Michigan he concentrates the most.

A detailed analysis of this artistic measure will be explained in the following chapter, but just as in the visual design and texts, the research has to begin with the study of a musical structure of this LP. It will give an overall view of the potential pieces of information that can be hidden within the sounds of the songs. After that, it is important to look closer on every composition and try to define what role they play in the perception of *Michigan* as a whole.

5.1. Musical Structure

When it comes to the specificity of Stevens’s album, one has to have in mind that it has the form of a concept album. David Owen Montgomery in his doctoral dissertation *The Rock Concept Album: Context And Analysis* writes that the idea of this form is based on a “totality of linked songs through compositional (musical and literary) and marketing (graphic and promotional) strategies that were both thematically explicit and undefined.”¹³⁶ *Michigan* fits into this definition perfectly. Songs that are part of a concept album do not have to have particular structure. However, remembering

¹³⁵ J. Covach, *op. cit.*, p. 454-55.

¹³⁶ D. O. Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

that it has to represent a narrative, it is common for them to have the same structure as any of the conceptual/narrative art like novels, movies etc. – introduction, main part, ending/summary, and maybe interludes, preludes and others. There are many examples that proves this hypothesis, like Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of The Moon*, David Bowie's *The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And Spiders From Mars*, or even Frank Zappa's *We're Only In It For The Money* and many more. *Michigan* is no exception with a very particular and clearly visible central structure and inner ones within each side of the vinyl discs.

The whole album consists of fifteen songs, divided in three parts – vinyl sides, and one additional side of bonus outtakes. The listener can notice a very general structure: *Flint...* as the introduction, songs 2-14 as main part, and *Vito's Ordination Song* as the conclusion. The first song on *Michigan* is played on solo piano with a minor accompaniment of horns, which significantly differs from the following tracks that are faster with a bigger arrangement. The conclusion is unlike *Flint...* being longer, more complex, with the usage of multiple instruments. Its character of the outro of the album – *Vito's Ordination Song* is marked by its hymnal, sing-along atmosphere with repetitive lyrics at the end that highlights its role. The Vinyl and CD versions of this composition differ significantly, but both have comparable elements like those noted above.

Moreover, after a more in-depth analysis, one can recognize the more sophisticated structure of *Michigan* with its inner configuration of each side. As mentioned before, *Flint...* serves as the opener of the whole album, the introduction to the entirety. The rest of the songs on the Side A are the first segment of the main part of the album – a narrative about Michigan with the emphasis on the reality of living in this state.

The sixth composition – *Tahquamenon Falls*, is an instrumental track that serves as an introduction to Side B. It is followed by *Holland* which is an acoustic song with a small arrangement. *Detroit...* is the central composition of Side B and the whole album, being literary in the middle (8th of 15 songs in total), and the longest on the LP and the second longest on CD version musically. *Romulus* is the mirror reflection of *Holland* having similar arrangement and sound. Moreover, *Alanson*, *Crooked River* is another mirror reflection of *Tahquamenon Falls* as a short instrumental composition depicting a water basin. In this case, the clear structure of A-B-C-B-A can be seen.

Side C is the most organizationally sophisticated part of *Michigan* which can be analyzed in both terms – as four songs that constitute the second “main part” segment of the LP and the conclusion, also having its own specific deliberate order. In the first case, it mirrors Side A, which opened with an introduction and was followed by four main songs – here it starts with the four compositions and ends with a conclusion to the whole album. The second interpretation of this side’s structure is that *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie* functions as an introduction to the following four tracks, which the next – *They Also Mourn...* being the central (or its inner “main part”) composition of the side. Its sound resembles *Detroit...* and is probably its continuation that makes one acknowledge its specific role by comparison. *Oh God...* is an extremely long (9:23 min on CD and 8:05 min on vinyl) and meditative composition that has characteristics of both – a central segment which is based on its length, as well as the acoustic songs similar to *Holland* and *Romulus*. Furthermore, *Redford (For Yia-Yia & Pappou)* continues atmosphere heard in *Oh God...* as instrumental piece analogous to *Tahquamenon Falls* and *Alan-son, Crooked River* despite being not about nature, but Stevens’s grandparents. The last song on the album, *Vito’s Ordination Song* is the conclusion to Side C and the whole album as well with its long refrain coda at the end. The last side of *Michigan*, Side D, consists of the bonus outtakes and is just an addition the core of the LP, which puts it outside of the structural considerations.

5.2. Analysis of Music

Michigan starts with *Flint (For the Unemployed and Underpaid)*, which music consists mostly of a solo piano and vocal with a minor accompaniment of horns. The simple, repetitive motif highlights the depressing, yet hopeful lyrics that focus on the fate of Flint. The music itself can be considered as a background used to put the lyrics in the center and set the mood for the rest of the album. By using only the piano and making an ascetic arrangement, Stevens directly tells the consumer that *Flint...* is the introduction, which seems obvious by comparison to the rest of the compositions that Side A consists of. Through the usage of this kind of a soundscape, the author bluntly intimates that the city of Flint has serious issues of unemployment and underpayment – the reflective and sometimes meditative character of music puts the listener in a position to sympathize with the narrator and his story, which leads to sadness and contemplation.

Michigan LP – Structure

		Title	CD time	LP time	Type		
1.	Side A	Flint (For the Unemployed and Underpaid)	3:43	3:44	Intro		
2.		All Good Naysayers, Speak Up! Or Forever Hold Your Peace!	4:33	4:34	M		
3.		For the Widows in Paradise, For the Fatherless in Ypsilanti	3:57	3:47	M		
4.		Say Yes! to M!ch!gan!	2:45	2:37	M		
5.		The Upper Peninsula	3:23	3:24	M		
6.	Side B	Tahquamenon Falls	2:18	2:24	A		
7.		Holland	3:26	3:29	B		
8.		Detroit, Lift Up Your Weary Head! (Rebuild! Restore! Reconsider!)	8:20	8:23	C		
9.		Romulus	4:41	4:45	B		
10.		Alanson, Crooked River	1:18	1:20	A		
11.	Side C	Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie	2:52	2:54	M	Intro	
12.		They Also Mourn Who Do Not Wear Black (For the Homeless in Muskegon)	6:21	6:23	M	C	M
13.		Oh God, Where Are You Now? (In Pickerel Lake? Pigeon? Marquette? Mackinaw?)	9:23	8:05	M	B	C
14.		Redford (For Yia-Yia & Pappou)	2:02	2:02	M	A	
15.		Vito's Ordination Song	7:06	4:13	Outro		
16.	Side D	Marching Band	-	3:43	BO		
17.		Niagara Falls	-	3:14	BO		
18.		Pickerel Lake	-	2:25	BO		
19.		Presidents & Magistrates	-	4:19	BO		
20.		Wolverine	-	2:11	BO	Outro	
Intro – Introduction; M – Main part; A – instrumental piece; B – acoustic song; C – central song; Outro – conclusion; BO – bonus outtake							

Source: Personal observations.

The mood is broken with the second song of the album – *All Good Naysayers, Speak Up! Or Forever Hold Your Peace!*. *Flint...* is segued to this track¹³⁷, which marks the beginning of the main part of the LP with its faster tempo, usage of broad spectrum of instruments with a rich arrangement. The artist used vibraphone, drums, guitars, recorders, background vocals and many others during this composition, making the contrast to the opening song even more visible. *For the Widows in Paradise, For the Fatherless in Ypsilanti* is the third song on the album, which marks the return to a more reflective tone of composition with a slower tempo and a tone of sadness. Despite the smaller number of instruments, one can hear a rich arrangement with the banjos as the main elements of the composition, with vocals, horns and piano in the background. The next song, *Say Yes! To Mich!gan!*, is again, like in *All Good Naysayers...*, more uplifting with the biggest sound and an extensive usage of various instruments in another contrast to *The Upper Peninsula* which concludes Side A. In the last song of this segment one can hear organs, drums, banjo, electric guitars and others, but just like in *Flint...* it is rather to underline the sad tone of the lyrics. Besides the first song on the album, which makes direct allusions to the depressing atmosphere of a particular place, the rest of Side A's compositions focus on the highlighting the lyrics and not to convey local references.

Music is especially important in the two of Side C's instrumental compositions – *Tahquamenon Falls* and *Alanson, Crooked River*. Due to the lack of lyrics, the main focus is on the sounds that both tracks present. As the title suggest, the main topic of those are Tahquamenon Falls – the two falls on Tahquamenon River, the Upper Falls being one of the most voluminous vertical waterfalls in the eastern U.S., making Tahquamenon Falls State Park one of the main tourist attractions of the Upper Peninsula¹³⁸; and the Crooked River located near Alanson, MI, which is the opposite of Tahquamenon Falls, being a short and little known stream approximately 5.6 miles long.¹³⁹ Both compositions have very similar form with pulsing rhythm (more distinct in the

¹³⁷ This artistic measurement is used extensively throughout the album that highlights its conceptual character.

¹³⁸ V. Wood, *Tahquamenon Falls State Park*, Exploring the North: The Upper Peninsula and Northern Wisconsin Traveler, <http://www.exploringthenorth.com/tahqua/tahqua.html> (26.06.2015).

¹³⁹ *Crooked River, Emmet County, MI*, Fishweb.com, <http://www.fishweb.com/maps/emmet/crookedriver/> (27.06.2015).

first one) played by vibraphones (or xylophone), whose style recalls the works by Steve Reich or Terry Riley.¹⁴⁰ Their sound references the falling or flowing water of two water basins that Stevens mentions. Keeping in mind that Michigan has approximately 1,194 square miles of inland water, which consists of more than 11,000 inland lakes and above 36,000 miles of streams, it is obvious that the author wanted to pay homage to this crucial element of the Michigan landscape. Moreover, if one is visiting the Wolverine State, there will be a water basin situated no further than six miles away regardless of one's location.¹⁴¹ By mentioning Tahquamenon Falls, Stevens referenced the most popular site of the Upper Peninsula to which he may or may not have had a personal relation. However, the inclusion of *Alanson, Crooked River* to *Michigan* LP's core content, a track about not a relatively unknown location, indicates that Stevens was personally connected to the place that he depicted and wanted to talk about. Both compositions serve as, respectively, the opening and closing tracks of Side C, which creates a specific framework of this part of the album, which highlights their significance for the whole LP even more.

Another two tracks that has to be analyzed together are *Holland* and *Romulus*. The analysis in the previous chapter showed that both songs have reflective lyrics about personal experiences distinctively placed in certain locations. Musically, they also are analogous, being acoustic compositions played on a guitar or banjo with a minor addition of other instruments like recorders, piano, or background vocals. Just like in the majority of Side A's songs, there are no direct references to the specificity of cities of Holland and Romulus. It has to be mentioned that the *Romulus* arrangement differs depending on the form of release: on the CD version the usage of instruments is richer in contrast to a toned-down sound that can be heard on the vinyl release.¹⁴²

Detroit, Lift Up Your Weary Head! (Rebuild! Restore! Reconsider!) plays the role of the central piece of the album (arguably along with *Say Yes! To Michigan!*), telling the story of Michigan's biggest city, so it is natural to expect multiple ref-

¹⁴⁰ *Michigan* by Sufjan Stevens, music.sufjan.com, <http://music.sufjan.com/album/michigan> (27.06.2015).

¹⁴¹ *Michigan's State Facts*, Michigan's Official Website, http://www.michigan.gov/som/0,1607,7-192-29938_30245-67959--,00.html (27.06.2015).

¹⁴² K. Blanton, *The 25 Best Sufjan Stevens Tracks*, Paste Magazine, <http://www.pastemagazine.com/blogs/lists/2012/03/25-best-sufjan-stevens-tracks.html> (27.06.2015).

erences to Motor City throughout this composition, especially because of its specific focus on one location. The song itself is multilayered, with numerous melodies played simultaneously and a sophisticated arrangement consisting of a large variety of instruments. This construction can be a reference to the turbulent times that Detroit went through, and its lively condition, sustained in spite of the city's decline. One may interpret the solo in the middle part of the composition as an exemplification of Detroit's transition from a glorious metropolis to crime, poverty and unemployment. Moreover, the last part of the composition, the ambient conclusion, may be also read as a reflection on its current status, or even a musical illustration of the stagnation and lack of progress that the author has seen in the city of his birth. On the other hand, while Detroit is considered a city probably most famous for the car industry, there is no direct allusion to this great part of its history. Furthermore, musically this metropolis is associated mostly with Motown Records, but does not bring up the topic of this company, nor its characteristic sound in *Detroit...* One may also consider techno music as another genre that originated in Michigan's biggest city, but there are also no mentions of it. Stevens remains faithful to his musical style in this song, as well as in other tracks of *Michigan LP*, referencing his home state mostly in the lyrics rather than when it comes to the compositions themselves.

Side C begins with *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie*, a short, but very rich musically composition that, just like the majority of the compositions on *Michigan*, has little or no direct references to the Great Lake State. The song tells the story of a local legend about a mother bear and her cubs, so a listener can assume that nature is its main theme. This notion is supported by the usage of crickets' sounds as the background of the last stanza until the end of composition. Despite that, Stevens does not reference the bears, Sleeping Bear Dunes, or city of Sault Ste. Marie, but just emphasizes the sublime story behind the lyrics by a rich arrangement and a big soundscape of the song.

The twelfth composition on *Michigan – They Also Mourn Who Do Not Wear Black (For The Homeless In Muskegon)* – musically resembles both *Detroit...* and *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie*. First of all, one can hear numerous melody lines, multiple instruments that are used to create probably the most sophisticated arrangement on the whole album. They are to large extent the same as in the central piece of LP, and stand out as one of the three compositions in the album written in this fashion, along with *All Good Naysayers...*

– in each of those cases the struck idiophone (vibraphone, xylophone or glockenspiel) and drums are the leading instruments. Although *They Also Mourn...* have no direct references to Michigan, it continues the musical sublimity of *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie*, with its grandiose soundscape.

An analogous situation can be found in the case of *Oh God, Where Are You Now? (In Pickerel Lake? Pigeon? Marquette? Mackinaw?)* where there are no direct references to Michigan in the musical layer. What is also worth mentioning, there is no mentioning of this state in the lyrics as well – the only connection that this composition has with the Wolverine State is within its title. In *Oh God...* the music is an extension of the theme that can be read in the lyrics – reflection, meditation and struggle with faith. A quiet and toned down arrangement highlights the lyrics and creates an impression of an ongoing prayer. It is also extremely important to point out that *Oh God...* is the longest composition on the album, but only on the CD version, because of its alteration due to the space saving issue. There is also another example of such measurement that was undertaken in the case of *For The Widows in Paradise, For The Fatherless In Ypsilanti* with the ambient outro of about 10 seconds, which also changes the first few seconds of *Say Yes! To M!ch!gan!*¹⁴³, but in a very minor way. The modification between the CD and vinyl version of *Oh God...* is emphatically more significant, because of the difference of nearly 1 minute and 20 seconds. The cut out part consists of ambient music played by an extremely reverbed piano, horns and other instruments hard to identify. It plays the role of a reflective moment and introduction to the following piece. Despite its missing on the vinyl version, its significance may be a subject of discussion due to its relatively small role in the song's and album's construction and structure. Nevertheless, by shortening the meditative ambient part of *Oh God...* Stevens quicker segues the song into *Redford (For Yia-Yia & Pappou)* which is to some extent its continuation with the general feeling of prayerful reflection and nostalgia, without any particular musical references to the specificity of Michigan.

There are two completely different versions of *Vito's Ordination Song* on the CD and vinyl versions of *Michigan*. First one, as heard on the compact is over 7 minutes long with organs as the main instrument that can be heard

¹⁴³ “For The Widows In Paradise, For The Fatherless In Ypsilanti” is segued into “Say Yes! To M!ch!gan!”, hence the impact of the last seconds of the former on the latter.

throughout the song. Its finale is very rich, monumental and anthem-like. In comparison, the vinyl version is only approximately 4 minutes 13 seconds long, where the banjo plays the most important role. The arrangement is much more ascetic and minimalistic, even in the finale of the composition where the main instrument is accompanied by a glockenspiel, piano, few guitars and vocals, while on the CD there are also horns, drums, and the track's production emphasizes broader sound, highlighting the fact that this song is the finale of an album. *Vito's Ordination Song* is the only song on the entire *Michigan LP* that does not reference the Wolverine State in music, lyrics, or title, but simply continues the stylistics that can be heard on Side C and throughout the album.

Side D's bonus outtakes can be characterized as having the same themes and aesthetics as the core content of *Michigan LP*. Just like in the majority of the compositions on this album, there are little or no direct mentions to Stevens's home state in musical layer. Interesting thing is that two of the outtakes' main theme are water basins – *Pickereel Lake* and *Niagara Falls* – but are significantly different than *Tahquamenon Falls* and *Alanson, Crooked River*, having lyrics and a form of a popular song rather than an instrumental piece resembling the contemporary experimental music. The whole Side D is named as *Bonus outtakes* with a reason – these songs theoretically are a part of a concept, but are excluded from the album itself, making them a kind of an exit music to LP, an extension of the conclusion played after the main part resembling pieces heard during the credits of the movie. Nevertheless, all of the bonus outtakes can be considered as structurally non-related material that fits into the broader concept and stylistics, or as an additional ending of *Michigan* with the song *Wolverine* as the second outro rather than finale, due to its quieter and more ascetic sound.

5.3. Role of Music in Perception of Album

Music itself can convey multiple messages and symbolize ideas that the author wants to manifest. The rebellious fast rhythm and energy of rock and roll, the anarchy behind punk, the racial identity in hip-hop – all of these classic examples of meanings behind a musical layer can show that there is a great potential of decoding the roles that sounds play. Just like the cases above, the “sounding” of a composition can implicate the idea behind it, but not only. The direct pieces of information also can be send via the sounds e.g. the idea of

community by sampling the sound of a crowd in Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, the atmosphere of war in the sirens at the beginning of Black Sabbath's *War Pigs*, greed exemplified in the sound of coins in the legendary Pink Floyd's sample in *Money*, or the general salutation that can be read from the cannons being fired at the end of AC/DC's *For Those About To Rock (We Salute You)*. These two forms exemplify how music, in the terms of sound only, can communicate messages between the sender (author) and the receiver (listener). By combining those two attitudes, one can search for various connotations to the theme that interests one the most.

After the detailed analysis of every track of the *Michigan* LP one can point out that there are multiple roles that music plays on this album by both particular "sounding" and direct referencing to specific issues. These two approaches fit into three subcategories that can summarize the most frequently used attitudes that the author represented in the usage of music in the context of the state of Michigan. First of all, music serves as a device that sets the mood for the whole album, being put in a particular stylistic which is reflected in every song in Stevens's work. Secondly, connected with the first attitude, the sounds highlight the lyrics, often forcing the listener to focus on a particular parts of lyrics, strengthening their message, or simply reflecting the general atmosphere of the stories told. Lastly, one can find a few significant musical references to Michigan state that can influence the construction of its image by the recipients.

5.3.1. General Stylistic and Setting the Mood

As it is very common, there is a great difficulty in proper description of genre or style in which a particular artist creates art. In case of Sufjan Stevens's *Michigan* there are no right or obvious answers like "punk", "experimental", "pop" etc. There were various attempts to define his "sound" made mostly by music critics. Allmusic's Gregory McIntosh in his review of the album writes that "[...] Stevens often plays his Jim O'Rourke and Stereolab cards, riffing along with complex polyphony in building loops and dynamics, but he also frequently imports lightly strummed guitars and stark banjo picking to break up the album and give it a rustic northern folk aesthetic."¹⁴⁴ The site also

¹⁴⁴ G. McIntosh, *Sufjan Stevens – Greetings from Michigan: The Great Lake State – All-Music Review*, Allmusic.com, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/greetings-from-michigan-the-great-lake-state-mw0000036637> (27.06.2015).

points out the specific genre, styles and moods that this LP can be defined by – Genre: Pop/Rock; Styles: Alternative/Indie Rock, Indie Pop, Alternative Singer/Songwriter, Indie Rock; Album Moods: Bittersweet, Complex, Delicate, Reflective, Smooth, Intimate, Sophisticated, Gentle, Calm/Peaceful.¹⁴⁵ One may find the contrast between the appearance of terms “rock” and “delicate”, “gentle”, “smooth”. In fact, Allmusic.com is the one of the few sources that describes *Michigan* as being a rock album. Rate Your Music is another rich database, mostly created by fans, which tags it as “Chamber Folk, Singer/Songwriter, Indie Folk, Americana, Chamber Pop, Folk Pop”.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, Amazon.com writes about this LP as being “Alternative Rock > Indie & Lo-Fi > Ambient Pop” and “Pop > Oldies > Baroque Pop”.¹⁴⁷ Fans listening to it via Last.fm have tagged it as “acoustic”, “alternative”, “folk”, “indie rock”, “singer-songwriter” and “wintercore” among others.¹⁴⁸ One has to also mention iTunes which presented very similar terms like Allmusic.com: “Singer/Songwriter, Music, Rock, Contemporary Folk, Alternative, Pop, Pop/Rock, Indie Rock”.¹⁴⁹

Having in mind these few attempts to define what the *Michigan* LP’s sound can be called, one could come to the conclusion that it is some kind of a mixture between rock, indie and folk music, which is a rather correct assumption. Most of the compositions of the album are clearly inspired by and sound like acoustic folk music, because of their ascetic arrangements, but on the other hand, there are many elements that fit the general stylistics of rock (distorted guitars, fast tempo), but even more indie and experimental (rich arrangements with the usage of unusual instruments).

The most competent person to define Stevens’s music is, of course, Stevens himself, who included few terms that define his 2003 album on his official website. One can read in the description of *Michigan* that its “songs resonate with a range of sources-Vince Guaraldi, Terry Riley, and Nick Drake as accompa-

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁶ *Michigan by Sufjan Stevens*, Rate Your Music, https://rateyourmusic.com/release/album/sufjan_stevens/michigan/ (27.06.2015).

¹⁴⁷ *Sufjan Stevens: Michigan*, Amazon.com, <http://www.amazon.com/Michigan-SUFJAN-STEVENSON/dp/B00009V7TZ> (27.06.2015).

¹⁴⁸ *Tags for Michigan – Sufjan Stevens*, Last.fm, www.last.fm/music/Sufjan+Stevens/Michigan/+tags (27.06.2015).

¹⁴⁹ *Greetings from Michigan – The Great Lake State (Deluxe Version) – Sufjan Stevens*, iTunes, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/greetings-from-michigan-great/id327920307> (27.06.2015).

nied by Stereolab and The Sea & Cake-in executing Stevens's peculiar palette that is simultaneously rock an blue-grass, jazz and pop, a style The Village Voice appraises as 'Arthur Lee meets the Book of Psalms.'" There are also few tags that were included on the page which are: "folk, indie, michigan, sufjan stevens, Brooklyn".¹⁵⁰ Artist's own description of his work emphasizes "folk" and "indie" that can be seen in the most of the previously mentioned sources. Therefore, these very broad terms seem to be appropriate to define what *Michigan* "sounds like" along with "indie rock", "chamber pop", "baroque pop" etc.

Defining the general sounding of Stevens's LP provides the framework for the analysis of the usage of overall stylistics in shaping the image of the Michigan state. Probably the first thing that every listener who has a basic knowledge about the history of American music would be searching for while listening to *Michigan* is Motown - references to the specificity of the subgenre known as Motown soul (or Detroit soul) which is the most important musical aspect of all the Wolverine State. What is very interesting, there are no such allusions or references on the album that supposedly should describe the state of Michigan. That raises questions of the objectivity of the author and his role in shaping what is the most representative aspects of Michigan. Moreover, the references to state's folk music are a debatable issue. There is no proof that Stevens actually was inspired by those artistic achievements.

These observations may lead to one of the key conclusions that seems to be crucial in the proper understanding of the construction of the image of Michigan on this album – Stevens is not trying to be objective or representative in his work, but creates a work that resembles his own vision of the Wolverine State that is connected to his personal experience and notions of this place. This is especially important in songs like *Detroit... or The Upper Peninsula*¹⁵¹, places with prominent local music scenes (folk, Motown soul, techno etc.) that could be extensively referenced in order to gain the documentary factor of the art. Despite minor hints like a distorted organ that could mention garage rock scene in *Detroit...* or the general style of folk in *The Upper Peninsula*¹⁵², there were no such allusions made.

¹⁵⁰ *Michigan by Sufjan Stevens...*

¹⁵¹ *Michigan Folksong Legacy*, Michigan State University, <http://museum.msu.edu/?q=node/1056> (27.06.2015).

¹⁵² One has to remember that this observation is highly probable to be the overinterpretation and effect of forced search for references of any kind to local music scenes.

Apart from the assumption that Stevens could reference the prominent Michigan artistic scenes, the music also plays a significant role in the songs that have unclear themes and uncertain meaning, or ones that are about the Wolverine State in general. In those cases, stylistic is extremely important in setting the mood – the aspect of an album that influences the overall impression that an LP makes on a recipient. In this case, compositions like *All Good Naysayers...*, *Say Yes! To M!ch!gan!*, *They Also Mourn...*, *Oh God...*, or *Vito's Ordination Song* seem to be good examples of serving as the representative samples of what *Michigan* has to offer. They all have in common the general lyrical theme of the state's reality, the feeling of community and references to Christianity, along with “indie”, “singer/songwriter”, “chamber pop”, and even elements of “rock” stylistics mentioned before. Music of all of these compositions can be described as reflective, meditative and uplifting, rich in arrangements, and generally ambitious that has a direct effect on the listener who can associate the features of these compositions with Michigan itself.

5.3.2. Highlighting Lyrics

This effect is even more significant when strengthened by the lyrics which the music highlights. The best example to illustrate this process is the opening track of the album – *Flint...* Lyrics tell the story of a man who lost his wife, his job, his accommodation and is placed, as the title suggests, in the city of Flint which struggles with unemployment and underpayment. The depressing textual layer of this track is supported by the music of a single piano with a minor addition of horns. This creates the overall reflective tone of the song, which is based on the mutual support of the lyrics and sound. A very similar situation can be found in the case of *The Upper Peninsula* where a daunting story about a man who, again, lost his “mind”, “life”, “job” and “wife”. Slow tempo, moaning vocals along with a banjo, organs and a distorted guitar at the end feed backs to the lyrics, and produces a distressing and gloomy atmosphere felt throughout the composition.

Flint..., *Detroit...* and *They Also Mourn...* are other interesting examples of the music usage in highlighting the lyrics. In these compositions, the melodies played by various instruments are in sync with those sung by the vocals. This process results in an effect of encouraging the recipient to pay more attention to the message that the author is conveying, making it clearer and more distinguished from the background sound.

There is also one stylistic measure used in *Michigan* that can, surprisingly, be considered as a factor allowing the listener to focus on the lyrics – the ambient / drone elements of the compositions. While the final 15 seconds of *Flint...* and about 10 closing seconds of *For the Widows...* may be treated as the segue to the next composition and building the suspense which is relieved in the following tracks, the last segments of *Detroit...* and *Oh God...* should be treated differently. They play a role of a meditation, a moment for reflection provided by the artist for the listener to contemplate the lyrics and the general meaning of the compositions. *Tahquamenon Falls* and *Alanson, Crooked River*, the two instrumental tracks from Side B, are similar cases, but they do not highlight the lyrics, because there are none, instead being a general contemplation of the nature mentioned in the lyrics, as well as the themes experienced throughout the whole LP.

5.3.3. References to the State of Michigan

Both these compositions are also the only examples of direct musical references to the specificity of the state of Michigan. Instrumentals *Tahquamenon Falls* and *Alanson, Crooked River* imitate sounds of waterfalls and rivers that indicate the importance of these aspects of the state's landscape as one of its main features. Also, in *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie* sounds of crickets at the end of song also imply the significance of nature in the Wolverine State.

Nevertheless, there are no other clearly audible cases of conveying hints about the characteristics of Michigan in the musical layer. While one may be able to hear the horns imitating honking cars in *Detroit*, guitar plucking that can resemble falling snow in *The Upper Peninsula* etc. these examples can be considered only as the exaggeration, forcibly conducted research, and analysis that is directed to find references at the cost of accuracy and truthfulness.

There are also different examples of possible allusions to specificity of particular locations as seen in *Flint...* and *Detroit...* In the first case, the depressing music and ascetic arrangement can signify poverty, stagnation and general lack of hope in the city, being not only the factor that highlights the lyrics, but also one which constructs an image of Flint on its own. The second song in question provides a similar pattern, where the general tone of the composition may be an allusion to the characteristic features of the Motor City – its livelihood, but also turbulences and the need to reflect on its future represented by the ambient music coda.

The search for direct references to Michigan is only one attitude that the academics may apply, the other one being the more holistic view of the album. The whole album is, *de facto*, one big allusion to the Wolverine State that forces the listener to think that every song, in some way, reflects its characteristics. In fact, there is no need for any particular literal hints like sounds of cars, animals, falling snow etc. when the whole LP represents what Michigan is. The truthfulness of this statement is, of course, up to debate, but it is undisputedly the effect that the music has on the listener despite the intentions of the author – packaging and lyrics are about the reality and features of Michigan, so music also has to share this role. The best support for this line of thought is the last song on the LP – *Vito's Ordination Song* – which is the only composition of the core 15 tracks of *Michigan* that does not refer to the Great Lake State in title, lyrics or music. Nevertheless, the audience of the album may assume that its main theme is in fact Wolverine State. The lack of any direct mentions in the textual or musical layers of this track is not important, the context of the art is primary – its inclusion in the core content of the album that is represented as being about Michigan. Despite having no references, the listener treats it as if it was about this state.

That can bring one to conclusion that music is not the most important factor in constructing Michigan's image in this LP. In fact, the lyrics and packaging (visual design) are unquestionably the main features that place the particular idea of what this location is in recipient's eyes. However, while each layer of the album is significant in the overall effect of constructing the image, the example of *Vito's Ordination Song* shows that maybe the chief factor is the context, the assumption that the idea of the album relates to Michigan is the most important. For the listener does not pay attention to every little detail or hint about what the state might look like, but absorbs the cultural text as one big concept, and puts each composition in the framework of this idea. The music plays the role of a background, a base for the lyrics.

Having that in mind, one may assume that it is the layer where the musician has the biggest freedom to create, because the lyrics can be denoted literary, as well as visual design, but musical references to the state are ambiguous if not unrecognizable or subject to over interpretation. Therefore, Stevens, by writing specific music creates a new concept of Michigan that is reflected by his art. The Wolverine State, in the mind of a recipient, is reflected in lyrics and visual design, so it has to be so in music. That makes the listener think that Michigan,

Part II

in a metaphorical way, is what the music is. By accepting this approach, one must admit that despite having few if any references to the Great Lake State, music is a powerful tool of creating its image – not necessarily reflecting its reality, but generating a new vision implicated by Stevens himself.

PART III

Rebuild! Restore! Reconsider!: Image of the State of Michigan and Its Construction

“From the trembling walls. It’s a great idea!
Everything you want. It’s a great idea!
From the Renaissance. It’s a great idea!
Everything you want. It’s a great idea!
Throw them all away. It’s a great idea!
From the Renaissance. It’s a great idea!
Everything you want.”¹⁵³

¹⁵³ S. Stevens, *Detroit, Lift Up Your Weary Head! (Rebuild! Restore! Reconsider!)* [in:] *Michigan*, Asthmatic Kitty, 2003.

6. Chapter Six: Analysis of *Michigan* LP

After looking closer at each of the album's layers – visual, textual, and musical – it is important to analyze them in the context of their function in constructing an image of Michigan. As explained before, they represent multiple approaches to the topic, documenting the state's reality, serving as a commentary, a reflection, a meditation etc. However, before coming to general conclusions about the purpose of cultural texts and their impact in generating a particular image of a location, one has to think about the methodology and a more theoretical approach to analyzing Michigan. It is extremely important to acknowledge that a musical album is much more than pure entertainment, something “cool”, “awesome” and a “rockin’ piece of [art]”, but a transmitter of important messages about culture, society, politics, human behaviors etc. By researching art in an academic way, one may find answers about the essence of a particular reality, its perception and construction.

Middleton writes in *Studying Popular Music* that “the level of popular assumption, the belief that music process sense, or conveys meanings, is unquestioned.” He compares this practice to semiotics and mentions the work of Umberto Eco and Gino Stefani as significantly helpful in its proper understanding.¹⁵⁴ David Brackett in the introduction to *Interpreting Popular Music* analyzes the work of Middleton summarizing it by stating that he has “distinguished between two levels of coding, what he terms ‘primary’ (form and syntactic relationships) and ‘secondary’ (content and connotation significance, both of which feed into a number of ‘general codes,’ ordered here from the most general to the relatively specific: *langue*, norms, sub-norms, dialects, styles, genres, sub-codes, idiolects, works, and performances.”¹⁵⁵ However, there is no need to treat this method as helpful due to its tendency to be excessively focused on details. Moreover, “the code” idea has been criticized “for arbitrarily limiting the range of possible relationships between signifiers and signifieds” which fits in the general criticism of structuralism, which often (if not always) fails to be useful when it comes to ambiguous artistic achievements.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ R. Middleton, *op.cit.*, p. 172-73.

¹⁵⁵ Brackett, David, *Interpreting popular music*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press 1995, p. 9-10.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

In case of *Michigan* it is also extremely important to mention one particular work of Gino Stefani, who “outlined a model of musical competence which, in its hierarchies, parallels Middleton’s presentation of general codes.”¹⁵⁷ According to Stefani, there are five levels of musical competence: General Codes, Social Practices, Musical Techniques, Styles, and Opus.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, he describes “high competence” and “popular competence” that defines the abilities of a listener – “signification effect would occur when a piece is interpreted on all levels; a relatively weak effect would occur if a General Code were interpreted without any information from the other levels, or, conversely, if a piece were interpreted purely on the [Opus] level.”¹⁵⁹ The notion of context is extremely important in analyzing music in Stefani’s way, which gives this methodology a clear advantage over pure structuralism that is often useless in artistic forms. Brackett also writes that this “context” in this meaning can speak “about the larger social and cultural context, about the individual background of the senders and receivers of the message, and about the background of the message itself”, which seems to be essential in this analysis of *Michigan*. Moreover, when an artistic piece’s is not clearly “coded” (Brackett uses the term “undercoded”), it makes it more open to various interpretations – the same situation occurs during interpretation, “the way in which we ‘decode’ a piece may change our sense of the piece we are hearing, necessitating an infinite series of new perspectives in the act of listening”.¹⁶⁰

Stefani in the context of Middleton and especially Brackett with his short study of *The Diamond Ring* in *Interpreting Popular Music* shows that there is great potential in researching messages conveyed by music, as well as true, detailed and academic meanings of the phrases “I don’t *understand* what punk rock is trying

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁸ According to Brackett, Stefani’s General Codes are „basic conventions through which we perceive or construct or interpret every experience [...]”, which is the „anthropological” level of competence available to everyone; Social Practices are “cultural institutions such as language, religion, industrial work, technology, sciences, etc.”; Musical Techniques consists of “theories, methods, and devices which are more or less specific and exclusive to musical practices, such as instrumental techniques, scales, composition forms, etc.”; Styles is the level in which “historical periods, cultural movements, authors, or groups of works” are recognized; Opus are “single musical works or events in their concrete individuality.” Brackett, p. 12.

¹⁵⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 13.

to say', 'the Rolling Stones *repeat* themselves, 'Bruce Springsteen just doesn't *get through* to me', 'the Beatles *articulated* what a whole generation felt', and so on."¹⁶¹ Mentioned methodologies may not be perfect in decoding the messages within *Michigan*, but they surely can play a role of a starting point and a general perspective that one could accept in detailed research of this piece of art.

That leads to another reflection, this time concerning the elements that play a role in the process of constructing the image of Michigan. General scheme of musical communication that could be very helpful in this case was cited by Middleton and assumes that there is a sender, channel, context, message, and receiver. The role of encoding and decoding is the basic matter that must be covered during any research of artistic achievement. Of course, all of these components cannot be researched without being culturally situated, which brings one, again, to the issue of competence as explained before.¹⁶² This results in the multiple ways in which an academic may analyze each cultural text, depending on the level of attention paid to a particular element.

In the case of studying a construction of an image of a location, one can say that the channel and message might be the essential element of the process, but it is only partly the truth. As highlighted many times before, the role of the sender – the author of the album – is extremely important in properly understanding why he wants to convey the messages that he sends. The artist's perspective is a good starting point in finding out what image he presents, what tools he uses, how and why. Important issues that also are worthy bringing up are folklore studies and microhistory that would help to understand the nature of the album, which leads to its proper decoding. It will not only bring one closer to recognizing the general purpose of the LP, but also support the analysis of what the artist sees, what reality he describes – general or his own world that he remembers. This leads to another topic that concerns the image itself and the dilemma – if it is the author's own variation of the reality that he depicts, what results can be brought by generalization and acknowledging it as the truth.

The essential role of the author has to be focused on to the same extent as the role of the channel (album, its packaging, lyrics, music etc.) and the message (ideas that this content conveys). When analyzing the LP itself, the receiver's (consumer of the album) importance is limited due to the ambiguity

¹⁶¹ R. Middleton, *op.cit.*, p. 172.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 173.

of the art, variety of optional interpretations, and the differentiations of potential listeners. There is not one, particular type of a person (target) to whom *Michigan* is directed, which makes it inefficient to research the impact of this LP on recipients in general. What is the goal of this work is rather to explore the ways in which the author *may* influence the audience, the tools he uses, and the image he constructs.

This is why the role of the author is so essential, because he is the one who presents his vision of Michigan that may or may not be adequate to the reality that is encountered in this state. Yet, by using multiple references to the Wolverine State, in visual design, texts, and music, Stevens builds the competence as a proficient in the knowledge of its culture. In order to achieve the impression of being fit to tell stories about the Great Lake State, he uses symbolism and explores the themes of patriotism and sentimentalism, influencing the recipients and indicating his trustworthiness.

Because of that, in this part of the work where the focus is on the analysis of *Michigan*, one has to emphasize the author himself, as one who constructs particular image of his home state, as well as the tools that he uses and the image itself. Without the in-depth research of the vision of Michigan which Stevens presents on his LP, one cannot fully understand the process of building the image. Thus, the main questions that an academic should ask in the course of finding out how cultural texts shape one's view of particular places are: *which* Michigan Sufjan Stevens presents in his LP, is it *his* Michigan, or one shared by other Michiganians, and most of all, how does he constructs this specific vision.

6.1. Correspondence Between the Three Layers of *Michigan* Album

In order to fully understand the specificity of *Michigan* and the image that it constructs, one has to focus on the correspondence between packaging, texts, and music of this LP. These elements cannot be taken into consideration as separate parts of the album, but as ones which constantly affect one another. The analysis of each one on their own surely helped to acknowledge its own meaning, functions and role that they play in the whole concept of the album. On the other hand, a more holistic approach provides the researcher with knowledge about the overall image of Michigan and the process of its construction.

Just as it was studied in second part of this work, the visual layer of *Michigan* is the first one that a consumer encounters. By seeing multiple references

to the state of Michigan, its symbolism and most famous features, the expectation of a trustworthy album that discusses the Wolverine State is created. The intuitive feeling that texts and music will be representative in the same way is highly probable to appear. This causes the recipient to anticipate lyrics and texts included in the packaging to also include symbolism, tell stories about the reality from the general perspective that is not biased, just like the visual design. It can be considered as the first major interaction between the layers of the album. In fact, the back cover essay and the LP's lyrics often reference Michigan, its reality, community and representative features, so the level of expectation is even higher when it comes to music. However, as explained in chapter five, only *Tahquamenon Falls*, *Alanson*, *Crooked River*, and *Sault Saint Marie* have minor references to the Great Lake State, while the rest have none. Yet, perversely one may risk a hypothesis that this impression is extended to compositions that do not resemble Michigan's reality. The lack of direct allusions to it is irrelevant when the overall marketing, visual design and lyrics fit into the idea of a concept album about Wolverine State.

Visual design supported by texts, supported by music, creates the overall image of an album that can be either a very representative depiction of state, or a credible artistic vision it, created by a competent author. Therefore, *Michigan* LP does not only play that role like other albums related to particular locations, like in Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Californication*, or Queens of the Stone Age's *Songs For the Deaf*, but uses the state of Michigan as its main topic, paying homage to it, documenting it, meditating about its reality etc., depending on interpretation. The author is focused on one place, which is the main character of his work. This emphasis can be clearly seen and acknowledged by a consumer, which causes every listener to approach it as a source of information about the state. Coherence, consistency, sometimes even unity of all three layers' messages strengthens the idea of a concept album, and makes it clearer and more convincing for consumers.

6.2. Image of the State of Michigan

This explanation provides the reason why only a simultaneous analysis of these elements of *Michigan* can lead to an understanding of the whole image of the Wolverine State presented by Stevens on his album. Every researched element focuses on different parts of the region's characteristic features – visual design on symbolism and nature; textual layer on reality, personal experience and

religion; music on the author's individual reception of the state due to the lack of direct references to objective elements recognizable by listener. By taking all of these into consideration, a very specific image of Michigan can be seen.

The impression of objectivity based on the visual design is undisputable. Stevens presents not only the most important symbols of the Great Lake State like white-tailed deer, or white pine, but also those without any official status like rainbow trout, or Ford's automobile. It shows that author has knowledge of Michigan's culture and is capable of selecting the most representative features of his home state.

However, there is a pattern in this presumable lack of bias – the focus on nature. The majority of paintings included in the packaging depict animals, water basins, trees etc., which from the beginning plants in the minds of consumers the vision of the Wolverine State being rich in fauna and flora, and also highlights its importance. This emphasis is supported by such compositions as *Tahquamenon Falls*, *Alanson*, *Crooked River*, *Sleeping Bear*, *Sault Saint Marie*, *The Upper Peninsula* etc., where nature seems to be one of the most important themes, if not even central like in mentioned instrumentals.

Besides forcing a focus on nature, the symbols included in the packaging may point out the significance of tradition in Michigan's communities – their connection with history, local identity and patriotism. Cultural legacy is not only mentioned in all sources of paintings like Wolverine State's coat of arms, official animals, and by marking the most important cities of the region, but also in compositions. *Sleeping Bear*, *Sault Saint Marie* heavily references *The Legend of Sleeping Bear*, popular Chippewa tale, *Detroit...* has multiple allusions to state's heritage etc. Moreover, tracks like *All Good Naysayers...*, *They Also Mourn...* and especially *Say Yes! to Mich!gan!* have very vivid patriotic themes, which highlights the pride of being Michiganiaan, living there and being a part of a bigger community.

One may think that with all this alleged objectivity, the image of the Great Lake State must be idealized, without any focus on the darker sides of this state. Still, Stevens does not omit difficult topics, he even criticizes the then-state of Michigan, often speaking of the need of change in both lyrics and the back cover essay. Stevens's homeland is depicted rather as a place like any other – far from being flawless, with many issues and problems, even crises, but with a great community, which is the hope for the better future. In this terms, Michigan can be compared to the whole United States, and every oth-

er state – a listener can have an impression that *Michigan* LP tells the story of his/her own home, but in the framework of the Wolverine State's symbolisms and reality.

The main problems that author speaks of are mentioned already in the first song's title – *Flint (For the Unemployed and Underpaid)*. These two issues appear in other compositions like *The Upper Peninsula*, *They Also Mourn...*, or *Detroit...* The latter one, along with the opening track, presents also the distinct themes of urbanization that affects local communities in often disastrous ways. Stevens also criticizes ineffective politics (*All Good Naysayers...*) and briefly mentions the issue of homelessness (*They Also Mourn...*). These examples prove that Stevens does not idealize Michigan, but speaks openly about its imperfections and problems. Still, the general tone of the LP is rather positive, emphasizing the Michiganians and the community they create, which is hoped to be the reason for optimistic thinking about state's future. This way of thinking is highlighted in the last song of the main part of the album – *Vito's Ordination Song*.

Despite the impression of a separation of the musical layer from the general concept, it plays a significant role in constructing the final image of Michigan. As explained before, by the assumption that the whole LP is about this particular state, there is a notion that the music also reflects what the Great Lake is. Even if it does not reflect the reality, the author creates such an illusion so that a consumer may think that it is so. By creating multilayered, sophisticated compositions, Stevens draws the image of a vibrant, lively, sometimes reflexive, but mostly hopeful state. This effect strengthens the message of texts and package, which creates an impression of Michigan being a fascinating, stimulating, hopeful and sometimes even thriving place.

However, what is most striking throughout *Michigan* is how much attention is paid to communities, basic social structures where all the hope is. The author often refers to them as the place where the real spirit of Michigan is. Sometimes does not even mention that a particular song is about his home state (or the reference is only in title), which can also lead to a conclusion that he, again, prolongs the interpretation to every place in U.S. Nonetheless, to say that *Michigan* is all about Michiganians alone is a far too risky conclusion. As proved, it can be considered as the main theme with the accompaniment of the topic of nature, as well as an often harsh reality placed in very particular locations. Despite these potentially gloomy motifs, the overall image of

Michigan is positive – a bright future is possible; with the help of every resident of this rich in nature and great history state, it can rise from decline and flourish again.

6.2.1. Author's Perspective

What also has to be acknowledged by a researcher is the fact that there are various other factors that influence the final image of the state of Michigan that the musician's 2003 LP provides. First of all, as briefly mentioned before, there is the author's perspective. From Stevens's biography one could recall that he was born in this state, grew up, went to various schools there, as well as to undergraduate college before leaving for New York in 2000. The year of his departure is very significant given that he started working on *Michigan* after his relocation. That leads to the first conclusion, that the album was recorded outside the state from the perspective of a native living a few hundred miles away. Despite the fact that Stevens spent his first 25 years of life mostly in Michigan, the process of writing the material must have been under the influence of his "emigrant" status. That could have caused a higher probability of sentimental, nostalgic, and patriotic themes in his compositions, what will be discussed later in the chapter.

In spite of the fact that it was New York City where *Michigan* was made, Stevens's credibility of making LP about his home state is undeniable. The impression of being a native Michiganian can be felt throughout the album, which is caused by references to various little known places, stories, and issues significant to this place. This feeling is deepened by the close look and detailed research of the symbols and allusions included. An academic may notice that e.g. middle part of *Detroit...* is not a case of randomly named features, but of carefully and deliberately selected parts of the city's reality. The same goes for the map of Michigan seen on the packaging, where Stevens has chosen and used specific samples of symbols and characteristic elements of the Wolverine State to reflect its image as seen by him – a Michiganian. The choice is often not obvious – one may argue about the representativeness of Holland, Paradise, or Ponshewaing in the context of the whole state. Yet, the author provides an objective selection that could be valid for both natives and aliens, which proves his reliability.

Moreover, the songs' narration can be another point that proves the credibility of Stevens. Most of the compositions heard on *Michigan* are written from the first person perspective as if a Michiganian was telling stories of

himself and his peers. From the author's biography one can conclude that some of these tracks are not based on his personal experiences like *Flint...*, or *The Upper Peninsula*, but for the consumers that are not aware of that this could mean that Stevens knows these problems first-hand. Nevertheless, most of the songs are to some extent based on the musician's own life events, which influences not only the way in which a recipient approaches the LP, but also the image of the state of Michigan itself, presumably proving the authenticity of the stories told in the lyrics, the vision presented with the graphics, and the atmosphere felt in the music.

Sufjan Stevens himself confirmed his own relation to the material on this album in relation to his latter LP: "*Illinois* is a projection of my enthusiasm and my imagination for a particular place that was a bit unfamiliar to me. It's really a fabrication. *Michigan* is more based on memory, so it's more introverted and melancholy."¹⁶³ These kind of declarations proves that the image presented on his album somehow reflects not only the reality, but his own reflection of the reality based on the author's own memory, still being a convincing imitation of the state that the author knows or knew in the past.

While melancholy, introversion, and nostalgia are present, there is no idealization of the image. Michigan is definitely not presented as a perfect place to live, but the album rather comments and reflects on it, with all of its flaws and problems, with the addition of local patriotism. Basing such work on memory may cause a disturbance of the objectivity, unpleasant moments being simply forgotten or repressed. However, *Michigan* proves that the relatively short period between Stevens's departure to New York and the premiere of the LP did not get in the way of covering both the positive and the negative aspects of the state.

6.2.2. Image and Implied Reality

A significant part of Michigan's image on the album in question is based on the depiction of the state's reality. During research one may distinguish the difference between the implied reality Stevens writes about and the general image of his homeland. In spite of the fact that he includes his reflections about the decline of Michigan's cities, poor living conditions, unemployment etc., in the end the recipient has positive vision of the state – the condition of the Wolverine State is bad, but things will eventually get better in the future.

¹⁶³ J. Crock, *Interviews – Sufjan Stevens*, Pitchfork.com, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/6335-sufjan-stevens/> (20.05.2015).

One has to pay an especially close attention to the examples of *Flint...* and *Detroit...* which present various allusions to the reality – the decline of the cities, harsh living, stagnation and lack of hope. Despite that implied condition, thanks to the music and the general tone of the lyrics, the image stays positive, e.g. because of such quotes as “I pretend to try, even if I tried alone.” in former, “Everything you want. It’s a great idea!” and vibrant, lively music background in the latter. No matter what the actual reality of these places is, if the lyrics reflect the nature of the problem, the author succeeds to force his vision on the listener, both when it comes to the harsh depiction and the commentary about the potential of optimistic prospects.

What is interesting, regardless of implying Stevens’s often depressing vision, Michigan itself remains unchanged. This happens mostly because the focus is not on the contemporary (2002-2003’s) status of the state, even if there are multiple references to it, but the perspective of the future with the regard to the reality. Most of the compositions like *Flint...*, *All Good Naysayers...*, *For the Widows...*, *Detroit...*, *They Also Mourn...*, or *Vito’s Ordination Song* present the what the Great Lake State is, but most importantly, in great majority, they show what it can be in future. This final note is even more important than the main part of most of the songs. Stevens, in fact, did not create a documentary LP about Michigan, but rather his impression on its condition and future based on its history and heritage, using very specific artistic measures to accomplish that goal no matter if deliberately or unintentionally.

6.3. Process of the Construction of the State of Michigan’s Image

Just like in the image itself, the perspective of the author is crucial in the process of constructing Michigan’s vision. The fact that Stevens is Michiganiaan, no matter if current or former, is essential in creating the impression that what he sang, wrote, and placed in the packaging has some meaning, and was used purposefully with a particular intention of accomplishing a deliberate goal.

As explained before, the author’s usage of his knowledge of Michigan is clear throughout the album, which with every song proves his credibility. Moreover, there could have been a situation where the usage of the allusions was incorrect – in this case non-natives would not notice those mistakes and the general outcome for them could have been the same, but for the natives, and people who have a greater knowledge of Michigan, it would surely be radically different. However, Stevens properly codes the allusions in the songs

making right connections between particular places' history (*Detroit...*), current problems (*Flint...*), cultural heritage (*Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie*), specificity of cities (*Holland*) and regions (*The Upper Peninsula*), or even natural beauty (*Tahquamenon Falls, Say Yes! to M!ch!gan!*).

Along with those aspects of the construction process, the first person perspective is also very important, as in the perspective of the narrator, not Stevens's own. Stories in both the songs and the back cover essay are presented from the standpoint of a person, again – Michiganiaan, who knows what they are talking about, who knows depicted problems firsthand and can relate to them. This influences the level of the listener's confidence in the truthfulness of the messages conveyed by the author. What is more, the narrator often condemns what he sees, presenting a critical look of his homeland. Trustworthiness is built with every song, and strengthened by the pleasant, welcoming, uplifting and hopeful general outcome.

There is also a possibility of generalizing Michigan with any other US state, by presenting popular themes that every American, and in fact, every person in the world, could relate to, like unemployment, emphasis on the beauty of nature, or a belief in a bright future with neighbors as helpers. Referencing characteristic elements of Michigan sometimes only in the titles, or using minor allusions could also bring to mind personal experiences of every recipient; the impression of inclusiveness is created, making the listener think of the state in question as a reflection of his or her own homeland.

This feeling is even more strengthened by the more general topics like religion, conversations with a higher power, struggle with daily life, attempts and proposals of the ways to change local reality for the better, or pride of being a native resident of a particular place. This process creates an extremely important bond between Michigan and the recipient through the author and his LP. Generality of themes, as well as the situation where the depicted state can be applied to any other place in U.S. or any other with similar reality is a great factor that rather than influence the image of Michigan itself, creates new possibilities for the recipient to apply content of the album to a wide variety of interpretations depending on consumer's own experience. This can happen despite the rather straightforward, clear, and unequivocal concept of the whole album.

In addition, a great factor that influences the process of constructing image of Michigan on this album is the structure, the analysis of which was undertaken throughout this work. The LP starts with the gloomy note of *Flint...* as the

opening composition, telling a story of a person who is living through a very hard time, but, on the other hand, is determined to get better. This scheme can be noticed in the whole album – sad themes are presented among the uplifting ones. Additionally, wherever there is a depressing theme, there is always a more positive ending note, or hope included. *Oh God...* can be considered as the most melancholic tune of the LP, still the narrator acknowledges that the receiver of his call – God – is the one in whom he must trust and fulfil his will. When it comes to ending with a hopeful accent, the two concluding compositions of two versions of this album are ones which best describe the scheme – *Vito's Ordination Song* and *Wolverine*. The former ends with a meaningful repetition of the last two verses along with the cheerful music in the background: “Rest in my arms. Sleep in my bed. / There's a design to what I did and said”. Second one, which concludes the vinyl version's Side D closes with important three verses, also having a rather positive connotation: “Take it in stride. / Take it—it's dry. / It's not your fault.” Again, this causes the listener to have a good feeling about Michigan, despite all the themes mentioning social, economic, and urban problems.

There is also another characteristic of *Michigan* LP structure that could be helpful in the analysis of the process of construction. The album's division into parts, its very distinct partition into four sides having different distinguished themes, inclusion of compositional elements like introduction, interludes, climaxes, preludes, conclusions, additional content etc., makes *Michigan* more accessible to the listener, easier to decode and acknowledge its main themes. A recipient of the LP instantly knows what is the most important feature of the album, based on its the structure, the length of the tracks, the title, placement of the song on the playlist, musical layer of composition etc. This significantly influences the process of building the image of Michigan for the listener, as well as effects its final outcome.

Apart from these features of *Michigan* and its role in constructing the image of the Wolverine State, there are a few other aspects that deserve more attention from researchers. Some of these were mentioned before while studying the content of the album and the image itself, but they also play an essential part in the process itself, as well as in deciding the general function of the album.

6.3.1. Role of Symbolism, Nostalgia, and Patriotism

Usage of state symbols throughout the LP has the obvious function of showing the most representative aspects of Michigan, as well as proving the credi-

bility of the author and highlighting the cultural heritage of the region. These hypotheses were studied in the previous chapters, and proved that symbolism is in fact one of the most important features of *Michigan*. Besides those roles, it is also significant because of its purpose of showing the pride of being Michiganian. Stevens places paintings of the state's official bird, tree, flower, even reptile, along with essential elements of a more local culture like a car associated with Detroit, or cherries with Traverse City, which means that he wanted to show what Michigan is, and why it is worth seeing and exploring. This statement can be proved by the quote from the most patriotic song on the album *Say Yes! to M!ch!gan!*: "Still I know what / to wear on my back: / Michigan! / Ponshevaing! / Cadillac!" Symbolism also shows the specificity of the state, making the recipient acknowledge its uniqueness, which helps with the general interpretation of its final image. On the other hand, this factor also shows the human side of Michigan – it is a state with real culture, real society, real symbols, real place and significance in American history, a real place that a listener can relate to if it shows similarity to a region one is living in. It leads to a strong influence on the perception of both Michigan and the *Michigan* LP.

Issues of sentimentalism and nostalgia are also extremely important in the process in question. For a recipient who is aware of Stevens's biography, it is clear that he relocated to New York before writing the album, and recreated the state that he remembered by creating *Michigan* LP. Author recalls his connection to the Wolverine State by using symbols, references to places where he grew up or formed as a person, or simply by fostering stories about locations he has bonded with. These allusions can be read as nostalgia, a perfect definition of which, perfectly fitting in this situation, is provided by Jon Hamm's character Don Draper in *Mad Men* TV series' *The Wheel* episode, where he advertises negative slide projector "Carousel":

"[...] [nostalgia] literary means 'the pain from an old wound.' It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn't a spaceship, it's a time machine. [...] it takes us to a place where we ache to go again. [...] It lets us travel the way a child travels – around and around, and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Quotes for Don Draper (Character) from "Mad Men" (2007), Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/character/cho031457/quotes> (26.06.2015).

In case of *Mad Men* “Carousel” was a projector, when it comes to Stevens’s work – it is *Michigan* LP by which he shows his feelings, connections, and rich memories about his homeland, with great impact of often unavoidable nostalgia rooted deep in the process of recreating memories about the place from where one comes from.

On the other hand, when a consumer is not aware of Stevens’s biographical context, the frequent occurrence of patriotism is even more clearly visible. Cited quote from *Say Yes! to Mich!gan!* proves that the narrator is proud of being Michiganian, that they associate themselves with this place in United States multiple times throughout lyrics and in back cover essay. It is said clearly that the Wolverine State is not flawless, but it is beautiful, with great people, that it has potential of being wonderful again. These recurring themes of pride and patriotism, specific and very personal connection of each narrator with the culture, history, and people of Michigan strengthens the impression of a strong local identity of the album’s author, even if a consumer does not put the content of *Michigan* in the context of the artist’s biography. Patriotism is understood in this case as a constructive criticism of the homeland, while believing in its bright future and being proud of knowing what to wear on one’s back – Michigan, paraphrasing Stevens’s composition.

6.3.2. Role of Local History

Local history served as the starting point for the analysis of *Michigan* LP in this work, so the importance of this issue cannot be undervalued. It plays various roles when it comes to the image of the state and the process of its construction. Comparing to symbolism, nostalgia, and patriotism, local history has a similar function when it comes to being a tool used for building credibility. By referencing specificity of places, events, people, even traditional Native Americans’ tales, Stevens can be seen as being eligible for presenting a vision of his state, it proves his knowledge and ability to use them in order to present his views.

The quintessence of local history is to explore the past events or culture in a given geographic area, which includes research of politics, society, economy, religion, intellectual works etc. It is to find the distinguishing characteristics of a place, and to learn from them.¹⁶⁵ It is also to interpret, recount, and describe

¹⁶⁵ C. Kammen, *op. cit.*, p. 4-5.

these elements of local reality.¹⁶⁶ Stevens does that almost in every single composition of *Michigan*, encouraging the recipient to discover the themes of state's history and reality that he wants to present. He starts with a story of a declining city and the saddening fate of workers in Flint, and then highlights the symbols and main features of the Wolverine State in *Say Yes! to M!ch!gan!*, and *Detroit...*, refers to old Chippewa tale in *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie*, concluding the core album with a commentary about the state's possible future packed with religious references, adding five songs that, again, mention the climate and the everyday life of Michigan.

The real question is about the selection of events that he describes, and why he does that. Recalling the study about Stevens's perspective may be very helpful in this case, due to the particular choices that he made. There is a certain pattern in the motifs that he decided to depict on the album, as well as the ones that he has chosen to omit, which have to be researched in a greater detail in order to fully understand the reason why he wanted the listeners to be acquainted with this specific image of *Michigan*, as well as what role does it play in achieving that goal.

6.3.2.1. Main Themes

The most commonly seen themes have been already explored in the chapter that analyzed the textual layer of this LP, and the main conclusion was that Stevens mostly discusses history and reality, nature, social issues and politics, personal reflections, and religion, with a strong background of hope for a bright future that lays in the hands of the state's communities. However, while these are very general areas of interest, when one narrows them to one particular context of the local history, there might be further conclusions to draw.

First of all, Stevens focuses on the characteristics of Michigan's landscape and how it influences his fellow Michigianians. It has to be brought up in the first place, because of the appearance of this theme on the packaging, in the visual design, as well as in the lyrical part of the LP – *The Upper Peninsula*, and the musical – *Tahquamenon Falls, Alanson Crooked River*. Secondly, there are clear motifs of telling the stories of people struggling with life in a post-industrial environment, as depicted in *Flint...*, *Detroit...*, or even in *They Also Mourn...*

¹⁶⁶ W. F. Dunbar, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1965, p. 9.

What seems to be conspicuous is that a great part of *Michigan* pays great attention to the Upper Peninsula part of the state. To be more precise, the majority of the album emphasizes the suburban areas, or at least less-populated areas, which are mostly in some way connected with Stevens's life. That way of thinking fits into previous cited Stevens quotation, where he admits to creating *Michigan* on the basis of his own memories. Because of that, one may think of this LP as a projection of a mostly white, suburban, religion-influenced version of the Wolverine State, with the acknowledgment of more industrial areas and problems that are significant to those places. That, once again, causes one to remember the importance of the artist's perspective and background, which seems to be strongly connected to the version of the local history he explores, and which influences the perception of the state by the recipients.

Due to these observations, which lead to the classification of *Michigan* LP's character, it can be indisputably regarded as a projection of Stevens's memory. It does not provide consumers with a wide selection of representative events that happened to the whole state of Michigan, but a small portion of the author's own reality to which he can relate to, and which he can depict with full responsibility. As a result of that, he is: more credible in his work; can describe events, places, and people in question more faithfully; can be regarded as trustworthy in his work, as he discusses only the topics that he can relate to. This has a significant influence on the process of constructing the image and the effects that it could cause – if a listener accepts these conclusions as the basis of the album's interpretation, it can provoke radically different perceptions of and attitudes toward Michigan. Few of them may include: recipients understanding it as an incomplete, but faithful depiction of the state; consumers being able to develop a stronger bond with the places that are portrayed in a relatable way from the participant's point of view; listeners being able to look critically at the events depicted in the LP, and to refrain from generalizing them to the whole state, etc.

6.3.2.2. Omitted Themes

In order to accept these statements, there is a need of a proof, which should consist of the examples of the objectively important issues for the people of Michigan that were not included in the visual design, textual or musical layer. There are various cases of important features of this state that went unnoticed, and without any mention within this LP – they varies from social, and cultural

issues, to lack of references to extremely important historical events that took place in Michigan, or people that were crucial in its past.

The main social problem that stands out as being the most significant in the history of 20th century Michigan were racial tensions between white and black citizens of Detroit, culminating in the 1967 Detroit riot. There is no mention of this problem in any of the twenty songs on the extended version of *Michigan*. Even the composition that emphasizes the state's biggest city – *Detroit...* – does not refer to racial issues, or one of the deadliest riots in U.S. ever. Events that took place in late July 1967 are considered as one of the most important moments in the whole Michigan's history, the one that still influences the way in which Motor City functions and the state it is in.¹⁶⁷

Another element that was overlooked on Stevens's LP, especially in the musical layer of the album, is the artistic heritage of Detroit, and its most characteristic styles like the Motown sound (Detroit soul), proto punk, techno, and garage rock. All of these extremely significant styles influenced not only the local artists, but the development of music in United States and all over the world. Instead of paying homage to those, Stevens decided to compose in his own style described in the previous chapters, including no direct references to styles important to Detroit and Michigan.¹⁶⁸

Despite having *The Upper Peninsula* on the LP, Sufjan also does not discuss the very specific culture of the Upper Peninsula's residents, who are called the Yoopers, representing the Yoopers' culture. In fact, the identity of that group is so strong that there have been various initiatives to create another state, seceding from the Union. The Upper Peninsula State would have been named Superior, or Northern Michigan, but plans never even came close to becoming reality. Because of the Fins and Scandinavians, who heavily influenced its culture, the distinctive dialect emerged influencing English, and is still used by the UP's communities. Also, there is a very significant hunting tradition among Yoopers, which is probably the most popular stereotype of this group. However, there is also a strong idea of nature preservation pres-

167 J. Kurth, M. Wilkinson, L. Aguilar, *Six decades in Detroit: How abandonment, racial tensions and financial missteps bankrupted the city*, The Detroit News, <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20131004/METRO01/310040001> (27.06.2015).

168 C. Morris, "White Stripes Lead Detroit Rock Revival" [in:] *Billboard*, 27 October 2001: p. 1, 93.

ent.¹⁶⁹ Liane Hansen of National Public Radio in her 2009 coverage of Yoopers' culture reported that the ideal of hard work and the ability to laugh at themselves and treat jokes about them with distance is what bonds them together.¹⁷⁰ None of these characteristics were mentioned either in *The Upper Peninsula*, or in other compositions of *Michigan*, except for the importance of winter and snow in the general UP's landscape. In addition to that, there are also no references to mining and timber industry that "brought prosperity" to this region in the late 19th century, and which provided wealth there for decades.¹⁷¹

One may also notice the lack of references to many greatly important places in Michigan, the most significant being the state's capital city – Lansing. There is also no mention of Ann Arbor, where University of Michigan is. This oldest university in the Wolverine State is considered to be one of the leading research facilities of the world according to Encyclopaedia Britannica.¹⁷² Grand Rapids, the second largest city in Michigan has also been omitted. When it comes to natural sites, there is no reference to the state's only National Park – Isle Royal¹⁷³, as well as its three massive National Forests – Hiawatha National Forest, Huron-Manistee National Forests and Ottawa National Forest.¹⁷⁴

Apart from mentioning a few notable people that contributed to Michigan's history, there are no signs of other extremely significant personas of this state and some of its most memorable events. Such historical figures like Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet were not mentioned in *Michigan*, despite playing essential roles in the era of early North American explorers (only in the title of *Oh God...*, but it is likely that it is allusion to city of Marquette, not person).¹⁷⁵

169 K. Abbey-Lambertz, *You've Probably Never Heard Of A Yooper, But Here's Why You'll Wish You Were One*, The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/27/yoopers-upper-peninsula-new-word_n_5042423.html (27.06.2015).

170 L. Hansen, *What's A Yooper?*, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/2009/09/27/113251618/whats-a-yooper> (27.06.2015).

171 W. F. Dunbar, *op. cit.*, p. 497-498.

172 *University of Michigan*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/University-of-Michigan> (20.06.2015).

173 *Michigan Parks*, National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/state/mi/index.htm> (20.06.2015).

174 *Find a Forest by State*, US Forest Service, http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/map/state_list.shtml (20.06.2015).

175 *People & Events: Jacques Marquette (1637-1675) and Louis Joliet (1646-1700)*, Public Broadcasting Service, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/chicago/peoplevents/p_mandj.html (20.06.2015).

Moreover, there are no references to the importance of French people in the development of this region. When it comes to the 19th century history, the biggest omission is the War of 1812, in which the city of Detroit had a crucial role. General Armstrong Custer also was not mentioned – one may think that such controversial figure shouldn't have had place on the album, this situation can be compared to inclusion of the song about John Wayne Gacy, Jr. in the *Illinois* LP. Also, the 38th President of the United States – Gerald Ford – was associated with Michigan and its city of Grand Rapids, representing its 5th district as a member of the House of Representatives prior to his presidency. Malcolm X, the famous civil rights activist, was raised in this state, living in its various cities before settling down in New York in his early 20s. There is also a great number of other significant actors, singers, entertainers, politicians, inventors, sportsmen etc. that contributed to the cultural shape of Michigan, but were not mentioned by Stevens.¹⁷⁶

The main purpose of these observations is not to criticize Stevens for his bias and selectivity. It does not cause *Michigan* to have less quality, or being worse resource for academic research. This process is just the element that influences the general construction of the image of the state – through what events, people, and places one get to know what Michigan is. It also affects the general character of the LP as not reflection of objective representativeness of the Wolverine State, but rather a personal vision of it that was recollected from his own memories as he was growing up. It is hard to imagine that while a teenager living in Petoskey he was emotionally connected with Ottawa National Forest, Louis Joliet, or 1967 Detroit riot that occurred eight years before he was even born.

Researcher may clearly see that the general process of constructing the image of Michigan has the form of a projection of this state from the perspective of Stevens himself. The author does not try to create an objective vision of his homeland, nor tries to idealize it. As he himself admitted – it is a result of accumulation of memories that he wrote down and released as a music album. Stevens created it as he saw the state of Michigan himself – from the point of view of a man growing up in Detroit, Petoskey, Holland, and many other places that he visited and lived in throughout the years.

¹⁷⁶ *Famous People from Michigan*, Michigan in Brief, <http://www.michiganinbrief.org/edition06/text/appendix/append-E.htm> (20.06.2015).

7. Chapter Seven: Interpretation of *Michigan*

Apart from exploring the image of the state of Michigan in Stevens's *Michigan* LP and the characteristics of the process of this image's construction, one also has to think about a more holistic perspective on the album. This brings the study into the phase of trying to interpret it, which will bring a researcher to the full understanding of what *Michigan* is, and what is its purpose – in what way one can see the Wolverine State's image being presented and constructed, and what effects can it have.

It is important to realize that there are various factors that can influence the overall interpretation of the album. Character and format of *Michigan* LP has been discussed throughout this paper many times, as being a complex and strictly structured work, with a particular concept and idea behind it. All of these components have particular effects on the outcome of the LP from the perspective of the artist who creates it, and the listener who perceives it. By manipulating the character of *Michigan*, its content, form, general idea, Stevens suggests a particular way in which it should be perceived. Analyzing his work itself, an academic does not have to pay close attention to his own statements about its form, for it would disturb the conclusions that should also apply to people that have no knowledge of the deeper context in which this LP was created. Therefore, the best way for the researcher is to try to interpret *Michigan* from the point of view of a person who is aware of it being a projection of memories, with a background of Stevens's biography, even a deeper understanding of characteristics of Michigan, and from the perspective of a person who does not know anything about it.

That leads to the question if *Michigan*, with its strict structure and concept, is open to various interpretations, if the recipient can acknowledge its ambiguous character and try to understand it in multiple ways. The unequivocal character of this album seems likely at first to be an homage and description of a beloved state, but in fact, with multiple factors that can alter its final effect and be perceived inversely by paying attention to different aspects of the whole piece. One of the main elements in question is the narration of the textual layer as written from a perspective of a Michiganiaan and sometimes with very unclear intentions that lead to ambiguousness – the key to a variety of understandings.

The starting point and the key to unveiling interpretation of the album is getting to know to what degree the artist imposes his own interpretation on

listener. It is important to acknowledge the factors that influence this process. This would lead to a number of possible answers for the question how one could understand *Michigan* in the context of the album's form as a concept album, the author's biography and his specific perspective, all of which influence how a recipient can perceive his work. This research can not only categorize the LP as one of the possible interpretations, but also give an academic valuable information about the character of the album in terms of it being a kind of a local history piece, microhistory work, or folklore art.

7.1. The Degree of Imposing Interpretation

In order to explore the issue of imposing interpretation one has to look closer on the author's role in creating the album, and, again, his perspective. Stevens is the sole designer of the whole LP – its visual, textual and musical concept; and sometimes even the first-person narrator of his work. He admits to being a Michiganiaan, highlights his identity throughout the album, *Say Yes! to M!ch!gan!* being best example, and presents his vision of the Wolverine State without any denial of his subjectivity. Despite being so straightforward in his message and his idea of Michigan, he gives recipients freedom to develop one by themselves in all three layers of *Michigan* LP.

The majority of visual design content in the album's packaging consists of official state symbols and most significant, representative, and popular features of the author's homeland. Just like in every case of that type, every symbol has a specific meaning in a context of a particular issue. In packaging of this album, the cultural background is the state of Michigan itself, and every sign must be interpreted in the light of this setting. Another important issue is the choice that Stevens made placing particular paintings in specific places of the packaging. This also influences listeners' interpretation and implies in what way should they be understood in opinion of the author. However, a consumer may also read these paintings in spite of the broader context, in the basic way, where symbols are understood verbatim. In this situation the recipient has total freedom in interpretation of what is seen. Nevertheless, in both cases, there is a great emphasis of nature, in connection to official state symbols of Michigan, and with general decoding. This means that visual design seems to present a potential wide range of interpretations, depending on the recipient and his/her role in acknowledging how these paintings, visual structure, and its meaning are understood.

In contrast, the textual layer seems to be much stricter when it comes to interpretations. Multiple direct references to Michigan's reality, communities, and history make them very clear when it comes to context in which they should be understood. Stevens often uses the Wolverine State as the background, mentioning it in title or lyrics, but there are also moments where there are no allusions to his homeland, which opens the possibility of other interpretations. Despite the implied context of Michigan that is suggested by the general concept, packaging, even interviews with the author, there is always a potential of reading them without any connection to this concept, as individual works of art. This gives recipients the possibility of a more general view of the texts, where they do not tell stories about Michigan, but another US state, or even just universal stories. Many of the texts also have a very reflective character, which does not have to be interpreted in one way. One has to remember that both the lyrics, and any other form of text in the packaging has to be perceived as poetry, and read as poetry, which can have multiple meanings, and is generally assumed to be ambiguous.

When it comes to music, it is rather clear that this is the only element of *Michigan* which can be read with a total freedom by the recipient. There are only minor if any references to Michigan itself, and those that were included in compositions are open to interpretation by the listener, the examples being the sad tone of *Flint...*, the folk sounding of *The Upper Peninsula*, the vibrant music of *Detroit...*, or the samples in *Sleeping Bear*, *Sault Saint Marie*. The concept forces the recipient to analyze the music in the context of the state of Michigan, and understand it through the background of that location, as well as visual packaging and textual layer, but lack of any direct hints creates an impression of freedom to interpret. Stevens decided to compose in style characteristic for his productions, giving up the idea of verbatim allusions, which makes music so ambiguous and open for various perceptions.

7.2. Possible Interpretations of *Michigan* LP

The moderate level of imposed interpretation of *Michigan* LP by its author, Sufjan Stevens, causes the situation where it can be understood in various different ways. There is no one "right" or "proper" way of reading its meaning. One of the main features of any music album, painting, novel, or any other work of art is its ambiguity. There are various ways in which a recipient can denote the codes included in the visuals, texts, or sounds, creating a probably

infinite number of configurations, varying among every recipient. The author can only propose a way in which the album can be understood.

When it comes to music, the suggestiveness of this behavior is also dependent on the form of an album. When it is compilation of loosely connected compositions, the listener has a greater freedom of interpreting each song individually. Situation changes when one encounters a concept album, where a consumer is to some extent forced to acknowledge the bigger idea behind the album, and to include that idea in the interpretation. For example, each track on Pink Floyd's *The Wall* can be decoded independently, but only when analyzing the concept behind it and trying to study them collectively, we can see the deeper meaning of the artist's suffering, struggles with overprotective mother, abusive teachers, and alienation; the same goes for the more contemporary Arcade Fire's masterpiece *The Suburbs* – there are very significant themes included in every song, but only when studied as a whole and in context of the LP's background, an academic can notice the theme of coming-of-age in suburban Houston, TX, peer pressure, finding individual identity, losing friendships, as well as the reflection about loss of childhood. There are also many other examples that illustrate this process that can also be applied to Stevens's *Michigan* and its potential to be interpreted in various ways.

Having in mind the ambiguity of the LP in question, and the fact that the author gave recipients a fair amount of freedom in analyzing every element of *Michigan* – visual design focusing on symbolism and its meanings uncertainty; lyrics that suggest interpretation through multiple references and allusions to Michigan, but by specific perspective, general themes and remarks making them more universal; music having no direct connection to the state's heritage, tradition, leaving recipient on his own in decoding. This causes various possible visions of the state's image that can be created by a listener. Every person who encounters *Michigan* can develop their own specific interpretation depending on what element of LP was emphasized – perspective, main theme, reflection, facts about the state, its reality, heritage, geography, etc. The key question that comes up during researching this issue is: what is *Michigan*, and in what fashion the state of Michigan is presented on this album? Approaching it from the various points of views and analyzing it as different forms would be essential in getting closer to the answer for this dilemma.

Chapter Seven: Interpretation of Michigan

7.2.1. Autobiography

First of all, the album in question can be interpreted as the author's depiction of his own experiences with the state of Michigan, its places and his personal connection to this location. When a consumer has some knowledge about Stevens's biography, his background, the distinct motif of illustrating the events of his life can be acknowledged. This leads to the assumption that *Michigan* is in fact an autobiographical album, in which every song reflects some section of artist's life led in the Wolverine State.

There are many factors that cause this approach to be convincing, the main one being the narration. Great majority of the compositions' lyrics are from the first-person perspective – in fact, 16 out of 17 tracks of the album which have some kind of text, includes the words “I”, “me”, “we” or “our”, which indicates that the author is the person who tells the story about himself, his family, his community, or his fellow Michiganians. Moreover, 9 of 17 songs (more than a half of the total number) has one of those words in the first verse, and 15 of 17 have them in their first stanzas. This shows that every composition, even in the case of tracks like *All Good Naysayers...*, or *They Also Mourn...*, which are the general reflections about Michigan, are indicated to be told by a Michiganian or in the name of Michiganians.

It is important to recognize that not only the compositions' lyrics, but also the back cover essay have a very clear and distinct first-person style of narration. First part of it is told from a very general point of view, but in contrast, the second one is an example of the collective Michiganians' narration. In the last three paragraphs, the word “we” appears 12 times, highlighting the importance of community, and its role in telling the coherent story about their state. Furthermore, the whole piece is credited to Sufjan Stevens, with his signature at the end, which also shows that it is he who embodies the voice of the residents of the Great Lake State.

On the other hand, the assumption of *Michigan* LP's interpretation as being a solely autobiographical album cannot be accepted. One has to remember that the main subject of Stevens's work is not his own life, but the state of Michigan, and places within. There may be various examples that can prove that during the process of writing he based the majority of compositions on his own life and experiences, but in the end it is the location that stands out as being the central part of this project. The author's biographical themes throughout *Michigan* can be treated rather as a window to the general reality

of the state – the story of an ordinary Michiganiaan, a person based on the author's life that fits into the image of Michigan that the artist wanted to present. Additionally, there are some stories that are written in the first-person perspective, but not necessarily are autobiographical. This also demonstrates the possibility of the LP's narration being just an attempt to use the tool of biographical motifs in order to create the credibility of the author and his stories, as well as generate the atmosphere of intimacy and trustworthiness.

This reasoning causes one to think that when the album as a whole is taken into consideration, it can be in fact treated as an autobiography, but not in the full measure. Some of the compositions, written from the first-person perspective, despite being the description of life events, may not apply to Stevens himself. That is why another possible interpretation can consider *Michigan* as a semi-autobiographical album, which fits into the scheme presented before where biographical elements serve only as a base for further exploration of themes discussed in songs. From the perspective of the author, this approach gives him much more freedom, because he is not forced to faithfully illustrate only those events that happened to him, but rather treat them as starting points to create other stories. This also appears to be in sync with the concept of writing an album based on memories, where they do not have to be accurately illustrated by graphics, lyrics, or music, but just serve as a base which contains some of the aspects of Stevens's life.

All of these examples prove that the interpretation of *Michigan* being an autobiographical album can be treated as one of the dominating ones. The author himself admitted that it was written as an illustration of his memories about the state, which is demonstrated by the numerous references to his own life. However, the case of *Michigan* is much more complicated when it comes to its character. When researching this LP, one has to acknowledge various other ways of understanding what Stevens's album is in order to fully understand the concept, its meaning, influence, and value.

7.2.2. Documentary

The second interpretation that comes to mind while researching *Michigan* is the attempt to create the documentation of the state's characteristics. The main reason for this assumption is the frequent usage of the symbols of Michigan, depiction of both popular and lesser known locations within its borders, as well as the portraying of Wolverine State's society, culture, folk tales, and general specificity

through visual art, texts, and to some extent via music. By placing all those elements in the album, Stevens makes it not only a commentary of the reality of the state, but also a valuable source of information about it. The consumer may have the knowledge that the artist is a Michigan native, which strengthens the assumption of this LP as the probable objective cultural text that has the function of not just an artistic vision, but has more features of a documentary album.

The first element that contributes to the construction of this impression is the symbolism mentioned before. The primary source of those elements can be seen on the covers, where Stevens placed numerous official state symbols of Michigan, which were analyzed deeply in the visual design chapter. This suggests that the album is not exclusively an artistic expression of the author, but also a source of information about a particular place – the consumer may learn what are the most representative elements of the state, what is most important for its population, but also what both the artist and the officials recognize as the most important elements of Michigan.

Apart from the visual part of *Michigan*, there are numerous symbols used within the textual layer. The most conspicuous example of that can be seen in *Detroit...*, where Stevens refers to numerous features of his home state, without further explanation, which suggests that the listeners should be able to decode them by themselves, therefore has documentary value of significant general knowledge helpful to understanding of what Michigan (and Detroit) is – “Henry Ford. Henry Ford. / Public Trans. Public Trans. [...] / Tigers game. Tigers game. / Eighty-four. Eighty-four. / Industry. Industry.” etc. When it comes to *Detroit...* it also has another function in creating the impression of *Michigan* as a documentary album – it consists of numerous mentions of historic and social events like “Eighty-four,” which can be reference to Detroit Tigers’ successful season, or one of the most destructive Devil’s Night in Detroit’s history.¹⁷⁷ The same goes for “Industry,” “Unemployment,” “Gun control,” “Auto Cars.” etc. Besides the central musical piece of the LP, there are also other examples of symbolism with documentary value throughout the album like in “If the lakes took / the place of the sea.” in *Say Yes! to Mich!gan!*, or ‘Oh Saint Marie! Give up / the rocking boats drowned. / The Captain is done.’ in *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie* to name just few.

¹⁷⁷ *Hundreds of Fires Light Up Devil’s Night in Detroit*, The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/01/us/hundreds-of-fires-light-up-devil-s-night-in-detroit.html> (27.06.2015).

Stevens's album can also be considered as a documentation of the social reality. As discussed before, there are various examples of the author speaking about Michigan's communities and their problems, often with a very philosophical attitude. This approach can be heard most clearly in compositions like *All Good Naysayers...*, *Say Yes! to Mich!gan!*, and *They Also Mourn...* The back cover essay is also a great addition to this issue, with its dissertation on the condition of the state's communities, their importance in shaping Michigan, and its possible future.

Local culture is the aspect of Michigan's characteristic that was covered with least attention, but despite that, a consumer may find significant references to some of its elements. *Sleeping Bear, Sault Saint Marie* is the most noticeable example, with it being a modern adaptation of *The Legend of Sleeping Bear*, an important Chippewa folk tale. Besides that, *Detroit...* contains multiple mentions of cultural aspects of the Wolverine State – references to sports, important dates, street names, events etc. These samples may be treated as a documentary feature of the LP – the starting point to further exploration and learning about the state by a consumer. Still, the author emphasizes characteristics of a place and society, with Michigan's cultural works being only a background to the more general motifs.

With the general concept of the album being the representation of the whole state of Michigan, it lacks many of its representative elements, which negates its fully documentary nature. A consumer can easily spot the subjectivity in the selection of elements that are featured on the LP, as well as the personal perspective and the author's experiences, which motivated and inspired most of the content. Therefore, *Michigan* can be considered as the state through the lenses of author's life. That causes the researcher to think of that album as a very subjective documentary of Stevens's own version of the Wolverine State, which has educational potential, but cannot be treated as a "textbook" of Michigan's history, society and culture.

7.2.3. Artistic Vision

On the other side of the interpretations' spectrum, in contrast to documentary, one could place perceiving *Michigan* as solely an artistic vision. Abandoning the attitude of comparison to the state's reality, social commentary, and the author's biography may provide some valuable addition to research, and give the academic an opportunity to look at this album as more of an illustration

of the author's imagination, and not as being an attempt to recreate the Wolverine State, or depict it faithfully.

This statement may seem to be very probable and likely to be adapted by every person who has knowledge of the state of Michigan, as well as know Stevens's biography. The subjectivity of the author's choices of events presented on the album directly suggests that faithful, objective and representative documentation of Michigan's reality was not the main goal of his work. The musician used his own stories as a starting point to telling stories about the state itself, which marks it as a very personal and intimate piece of art, making it mainly Stevens's artistic vision and reflection. Moreover, he used the general themes to illustrate sentiments of the Wolverine State and the whole US, like harsh reality, beauty of nature, and especially religion and faith, which may lead to a conclusion that *Michigan* is not an LP about the Great Lake State, but *de facto* a work about the US and its specificity, culture, and importance of community. Stevens in his vision depicted the American society through the sentiments that he thought to be proper in illustrating the events, emotions, and reflections that he lived through.

Another aspect that must be brought to an academic's attention is that the author does not hide his own views, which strengthens subjectivism found before in the selection of the events depicted on the album. He uses a specific perspective, which emphasizes his role as an artist, as seen in *All Good Naysayers...*, *Say Yes! to M!ch!gan!*, *Detroit...*, *They Also Mourn...*, etc., which creates the impression that he is not the author of a documentary, but a person expressing his views about his homeland to which every listener can rely by comparison to his own state of origin.

Probably the most important aspect of this conclusion is that every piece of art or cultural text is an exemplification of the artistic vision of the author. This statement is supported by various cases easily found throughout the album, its background and concept. Yet, specificity of *Michigan* forces the researcher to look beyond that assumption, and to acknowledge other possible interpretations like those mentioned before.

7.2.4. State's Promotion

Another possible interpretation of the LP in question is the attempt to promote the author's homeland by writing compositions that foster knowledge and praises its valuable features. The first thing that must be taken into consideration when looking at the album in such manner is the construction of the

front and back covers. Their structure resembles graphic design of a postcard, with its “Greetings from [...]” phrase, images of characteristic elements of Michigan landscape, and even State’s Seal. By drawing comparison between the role of a postcard – promotion, sharing experience of visiting a place, some kind of a souvenir, popularization of the depicted location, and simply sending greetings from that state – and the LP, one may find many common elements that make both cultural texts alike.

Once again, the perspective of an author is crucial in critic approach to issue of accepting this interpretation. The whole album is written from the first person point of view, which suggests that the image of the state within the LP would be very subjective with a focus on personal reflections. Stevens sometimes, but very rarely, idealizes Michigan, which is probably caused by nostalgia, sentimentalism, and his status of a person who grew up there, but after completing his education in Hope College, in Holland, emigrated to New York. However, the most common attitude that might be found on *Michigan* is quite the opposite – very down to earth, critical view of the state and a commentary about its harsh reality. Stevens created compositions that highlight the good sides of Michigan, but he also did not omit its bad sides with harsh reality, poverty, need to rebuild, social problems etc.

By these assumptions, a researcher might come to a conclusion that the author does not try to promote Michigan, but attempts to reflect the sentiments of the state by presenting its whole image – for better or worse. He may be promoting it as a human place, just like every other location, state or city in the United States, to which every person can rely to, but he does not create the illusion of perfection – both natural and social – within Michigan. Therefore, the promotion of the Wolverine State may be seen more as fostering the state itself – pieces of information about it, its reality, culture, perception of society, history, sentiments.

7.2.5. Homage

Last but not least, an homage can be treated as the compilation of every previously discussed interpretation. Stevens’s depiction of his homeland is very subjective, critical and nostalgic – he does not try to illustrate it as a perfect place, does not hide its bad sides, but attempts to stay faithful to reality, which builds the impression of truthfulness and credibility. All of these elements build a general construct of an homage – lacking in idealization, but rather paying respect to a place through telling stories about its reality, culture, history, and people.

Acknowledging the auto- or semi-biographical elements in the album supports these statements. The author stated on multiple occasions that Michigan was the inspiration of his early career when he started writing songs. By creating a whole LP about the state where he grew up and went to school he constructed the impression of paying tribute to those places, which probably formed him as a person and artist. This conclusion also has been confirmed by the artist himself during a concert at the Masonic Temple in April 2015, in Detroit, the city of his birth, where he said:

“[...] Memory is such a funny thing, though, you know. It’s all colored by the imagination. A lot of people ask me, ‘Well where did you inherit the imagination for songwriting?’ For a while I thought it was Waldorf School, because I went to Detroit Waldorf School for many years. And for a while I thought it was because my parents did drugs and were hippies and in a cult. And then for a while I thought it was because I didn’t start reading until I was like 15 years old. I was kind of an illiterate child, because of Waldorf School. So that cultivated my imagination. I’m not sure why.

Sometimes I think it’s just because I’m from here, from Detroit, because I started to think that this is the city of imagination. People talk about it like the city of industry, and you know, automobiles. The city of Motown music. And I hate when people call it, like apocalyptic, and refer to like, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. I think that’s bullshit, because I think it’s actually more like *Dungeons & Dragons*, which is a land of fierce imagination where anything is possible. We’ve got sexy ladies wielding swords and gargoyles coming to life. It’s Choose Your Own Adventure here. Anyway, I just wanted to say I’m happy to be back so thanks for having us.”¹⁷⁸

This part of the speech, now often called as the *Detroit Monologue*, is not a part of the *Michigan* LP package, has no relation to this part of Stevens’s discography whatsoever – he played only one song from this album during this particular concert, focusing mainly on *Carrie & Lowell*, which he was promoting. Despite that, these last two paragraphs of his probably improvised speech can exemplify Stevens’s attitude towards Detroit, the state of Michigan, and the process of songwriting, which is rooted in the experience of him growing

178 L. DeVito, *Concert review Sufjan Stevens rambles about growing up in Detroit*, Detroit Metro Times, [http://www.metrotimes.com/Blogs/archives/2015/04/29/concert-review-sufjan-stevens-rambles-about-growing-up-in-detroit\(27.06.2015\)](http://www.metrotimes.com/Blogs/archives/2015/04/29/concert-review-sufjan-stevens-rambles-about-growing-up-in-detroit(27.06.2015)).

up in this distinct place. The author both criticizes and praises locations associated with his youth, which makes a listener think of the album as objective, trustworthy, and faithful to the reality that it depicts. In spite of the great probability of the deformation of the true image due to the specificity of memories itself that tend to idealize the past with connection to nostalgia and sentimentalism, Stevens included darker sides of the landscape within his work. This proves that he did not blindly admire the Great Lake State, but referred to it as a human region, with serious problems, bright sides, and hope for future.

Michigan is very personal, which suggests that the material was thought of as an homage, but also as a faithful representation of what this state really is. This LP without any doubt can be treated as an homage, but not only that. It has some very significant elements of this specific type of work, but one may argue that in order to be one, it should consist of a more optimistic and positive content. On the other hand, it may be perceived as a distinct version of an homage with all of the state's sides represented. The author constructed an image of Michigan as a hospitable, beautiful state with great people, but also with a human side of harsh reality, all of which are parts of its specific landscape within which he grew up, went to school, formed as a person and artist, and to which he paid his respect by writing this album.

The *Michigan* LP's interpretation is indisputably ambiguous and cannot be limited only to one of those provided above. Specificity of this work requires a researcher and consumer to acknowledge the possibility that it has elements of many of them, without emphasizing any particular one. Its interpretation depends on the aspect in which an academic or listener is mostly interested in, and from what perspective they approach it, just like in any other interpretation of a work of art. However, *Michigan* being about one particular place makes it even more interesting in the context of its cultural value as a piece which constructs a specific image of the state, and presents it to consumers. That is one of the main reasons why it should also be analyzed and interpreted in the context of the local history, folklore, or microhistory, and not just solely as a music album, a work of art.

7.3. *Michigan* as Local History, Folklore, Microhistory

Specificity of *Michigan* as being about a particular place and its features forces a researcher to expand from interpreting it "only" as an ordinary music album, to something more, as it was proven earlier. The fact that Stevens's work can

be understood as a source of information about characteristic landscape of his home state is indisputable. Throughout the album he provided multiple references to Michigan's history, communities, culture, analyzed reality and suggested ways to improve living conditions of its residents. When an academic acknowledges these features of the *Michigan* LP, it becomes clear that it can become a source of more academic research, and a work which should also be analyzed in the context of other methodologies than just content analysis. As explained in the theoretical introduction chapter, there are three approaches that seem to be valuable when studying Stevens's album, which are local history, folklore, and microhistory. All of them may provide important pieces of information that could contribute to the whole image of what *Michigan* LP is. Three mentioned approaches have a lot in common, which is learning about specificity of a region, getting to know its culture, attempting to expand observations to bigger conclusions – understanding analyzed state. The album in question is an example of a source which can contribute to researching all of these issues, shedding light on the matter of constructing an image of Michigan in the LP, as well as on how the artist can influence his listeners in perceiving the Wolverine State.

During the analysis of graphic, textual, and musical layers of *Michigan*, one might have found that Stevens used motifs of local history in every one of those elements, varying in frequency and intensity with focus on graphics and textual aspects of LP. As a person brought up in the Great Lake State, he interpreted his vision of his homeland within the context of its history, society, nature, culture, and provided a new cultural text about specific version of *Michigan*, his version. Stevens took elements of the state's landscape, the features most important to him personally, and constructed a new local history by creating a work of art under the very general name of *Michigan*. For the ordinary listener, there is no suggestion that this is a very subjective, personal, intimate reimagining of the region, which may cause consumers to think that it really is the work of deep-insight, academic-history, documentary-objective, that provides a full image of the state.

The role of local history in this process is absolutely crucial, because Stevens mentions features of the Wolverine State's landscape in almost every song, creating an assumption of what Michigan is. Therefore, a researcher may conclude that the author transforms, converts, recreates with addition of personal experience, and modifies the local history for his own purposes and crafts *the*

new cultural local history, which is connected to him personally. The consumers do not know without deeper analysis that it is not a representative image of Michigan, but it is probable that they accept the view of it provided by the artist. This *new cultural local history* based on the specificity of a cultural text and its influence can be seen in many other music albums, films, books etc., that provides a much more appealing and approachable image of the region than textbooks, or other “more scientific” resources. As a result, *Michigan* by using references to the state, providing pieces of information about it, then putting it in the framework of a musical piece, can be considered as an artistic version of local history, where research has been done by the artist himself, which fits into the general concept of what the study of local history is.¹⁷⁹

Having these conclusions about the author’s perspective in mind, one could be interested in the actual type of the artistic piece in question. If it was created by a Michiganiaan about his home state, one could risk a hypothesis that this LP could be treated as a contemporary representation of local folklore culture. However, this statement can be very easily disproved, by simply referring to one of the definitions of what “folklore” is, as well as what differs it from “popular lore”. David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty cite the collector’s guide by MacEdward Leach and Henry Glassie, in which they distinguished the dissimilarity between those two. They wrote that folklore “has internal strengths and beauties given it by generations of carriers and molders”, and that it is clearly noticeable comparing to “materials found at other levels of culture.” Kyvig and Marty add to these observations that “the best sign that something is really ‘folk’ is evidence that it may be found at different times and in different places.”¹⁸⁰ This statement definitely disqualifies *Michigan* as a folklore piece of art, despite being made by a Michiganiaan about his homeland, because there is no evidence that his very personal and reflective work has those qualities. On the other hand, there can be some examples of usage of folklore within the *Michigan* LP, like in *Sleeping Bear*, *Sault Saint Marie*, but generally these themes play an insignificant role and their influence on the final image cannot be exaggerated.

The issue of microhistory is not very clear in the context of *Michigan*. The whole album is created from a very distinct and easily visible first-person per-

179 C. Kammen, *op. cit.*, p. 2-5.

180 D. E. Kyvig, M. A. Marty, *op. cit.*, p. 129-130.

Chapter Seven: Interpretation of Michigan

spective, which tells the story of a particular person, the author, who uses the songs to describe his own experiences and reflections about the state. However, the methodology requires the potential of expanding this personal view to a bigger picture, which would help to understand the whole state. This process would be extremely controversial in this case, mostly because of the great number of omitted elements of Michigan's landscape, which neglects the representativeness of the image of the state provided on the album. On the other hand, one may think of the *Michigan* LP as the microhistorical piece about the particular type of a Michiganiaan – white, Anglo-Saxon, who lived most of his life in suburbs, who grew up in this state and left because of the lack of perspectives, but with a hope of better future. Still, using this methodology in *Michigan* album is controversial and risky, but has a complementary role to other ways of understanding this LP, the image of Michigan and its construction in it.

Stevens's album without any doubt can be treated as a contemporary local history piece that must be acknowledged as an important, valuable and a very rare example of work that contributes to researching the Wolverine State. *Michigan* in its ambiguous character can be understood as both an artistic piece and an academic resource, which makes it unique and exceptional. One cannot think of it as solely an autobiography, a documentary piece, or an homage, because in this case it would lose much of its academic value. By looking beyond the artistic borders, and expanding its character to the field of academia, both the listener and researcher may find many extremely important pieces of information about how Michigan can be perceived by the artist, its former resident, and a Michiganiaan. The *Michigan* LP unarguably recreates local history by putting its landscape in the framework of personal experience and stories, refers to its textbook-style history, culture and society, but also reinvents Michigan itself and rewrites it in the form of a pop-cultural text – a music album.

8. Conclusion

By recording *Michigan*, Sufjan Stevens created a work of art that can be understood in various ways. First of all, it is a very ambitious, complex piece that contains sophisticated music, thought-through lyrics with all of the additional content that makes a consumer acknowledge that this LP is not only a musical piece, but a coherent, multi-layered project, a concept album focusing on the state of Michigan. Secondly, the author reached far beyond the field of music, delivering a commentary and a reflection about his homeland. In the eyes of academics, his album is a proper starting point to the analysis of subjective ways of describing local communities, their heritage, traditions, culture, and possible future. *Michigan* allows for studying the Great Lake State firsthand, from the perspective of a person that is connected to all those places that he sings and composes about. Even having in mind the subjectivity of the messages that Stevens conveys, one may find valuable pieces of information about this particular state, as well as the whole American identity throughout these tracks.

As it was mentioned in the analytical chapters, the author described his homeland, places that he felt connected with, that he had memories of. This means that he is capable of depicting Michigan's reality as it was perceived by him – a member of a community. Contrary to his *Illinois* album, it is highly probable that Stevens experienced the events illustrated throughout the album firsthand, which makes it trustworthy. It has to be noted that he has shown his own version of the state, omitting various extremely important elements of its landscape that are instrumental in understanding what this state is.

These conclusions lead to even more interesting and more general questions and thoughts about consumers' ability to acknowledge a full, objective picture of a place, region, country etc. Having in mind that *Michigan* represents the author's version of the place that he knew, the receiver – a person who listens to the album, reads lyrics, analyses the visual design – is exposed to only one side of the story, which in Stevens's case is a middle class, white family from Detroit, Petoskey and to some extent Holland, MI. That causes the image of Michigan state to be unrepresentative. A consumer does not acknowledge some elements of this place's reality that the musician omits. On the other hand, some of them are exposed, which makes a receiver believe that they are true, despite them being or not being consistent with reality. Furthermore, this creates a false impression of whom Michigianians are, what nature

Conclusion

is, what the biggest issues in this state are. This process may result in extremely important effects that can influence whole societies.

Sufjan Stevens creates culture with *Michigan*. He not only recorded an album that is a valuable addition to the American singer-songwriter scene, but also, by presenting his concept in such a coherent and complexed way, showed how an author can build an image of a place that makes impression of being trustworthy and truthful. By means of making numerous references to local history, tradition, landscape, characteristics of communities, he encourages consumers to recognize Michigan in such a fashion that he wants them to accept. What is more, this persuasion is not forced, but strongly suggested, leaving listeners the illusion of choosing the image that they acknowledge as their own. This is because of the visual design that is presented as if it was a documentary representation of what the most important features of Michigan are, but also because of the very locally-centered lyrics. One of the few ways to recognize the subjectivity of *Michigan* is the awareness of Stevens's biography or one's own general knowledge about the state and the ability to analyze and compare both. It is obvious that not every consumer, especially a foreign one, has the capability to do so, which is somewhat frightening – basing one's impression on a single, very persuasive cultural text. However, this cannot be treated as Stevens's deliberate action with positive or negative connotations, but it shows the potential of cultural texts' capability to create culture.

The aforementioned process of shaping culture consists of exposing receivers to particular image of the place that can influence their behavior. It is obvious that the social ability to acquire knowledge depends on popular culture. People gain facts about the surrounding world through various sources, some of them being academic sources or personal experience that have illusion of being unbiased. However, this kind of knowledge requires great mental, psychic, or economic resources that enable understanding and analysis of textbooks, or traveling to places that one wants to get familiar with.

Because of that, popular culture gains primary role in shaping general impressions about places – through music, films, books, paintings, TV series etc. Their role cannot be underestimated. One may risk a thesis that these are the main sources for majority of population shaping their image of locations that they are not familiar with. This process can be compared with research undertaken by Gerbner and Gross that studied effects of watching television. Their theory of cultivation proposed that “the more time people spend *living* in the

Conclusion

television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality as portrayed on television.”¹⁸¹ One may assume that popular culture creates similar effects. *Michigan* is an example of text that did not broke out to become mainstream, which means that its effects probably were not very extensive. Nonetheless, extremely popular cultural texts may be responsible for people constructing their images of particular places on a much larger scale.¹⁸²

This leads to an assumption that cultural texts, especially popular culture, are able to influence human attitudes and behaviors towards particular places. One may only deliberate about the influence of *Miami Vice* and *Scarface* on people’s assumption of what Miami is, if it’s full of sunshine, beautiful beaches and crime. This example leads to a number of others, including one that was analyzed academically – the influence of *Gone With the Wind* on the perception of American South and its cultural heritage. The story depicting this region from the perspective of Southerners creates an illusion of a nostalgic, idyllic place. One has to mention that this film is considered as one of the most successful of all time, so it can be assumed that its influence is significant. The importance of the image of particular places in cultural texts can be also seen nowadays, also in the case of Michigan. Films like *8 Mile* or *Gran Torino* creates impression of Detroit as being xenophobic, racist, extremely poor, and in state of decline. It definitely does not encourage people to travel there personally, and even if one does visit, it is possible that they will be prejudiced about the reality there.

Michigan is a very specific case of such a cultural text that presents a particular image of the state and inspires image building in the receiver’s mind. Stevens’s LP demythologizes Michigan when one takes into consideration most of the cultural texts, which depicts it as full of crime and decline. The author shows that it is full of supportive communities, breathtaking nature that is put in the framework of a harsh reality, but the prospect is rather positive. Still, when one accepts the thesis about the lack of objectivity in a work of art, this album cannot be treated as a demythologization, but only a remytholo-

181 R.M. Berns, *Child, Family, School, Community: Socialization and Support*, Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning 2013, p. 333.

182 One must note that without complex quantitative research academic cannot measure the influence of popular text. Even if one would undertake such study, the results are not verifiable due to the qualitative and variable effects of such process.

Conclusion

gization that reconstructs what was known about the Great Lake State, and strengthens new connotations presented to its receivers. Michigan depicted on this LP is not “real”¹⁸³ Michigan, but Stevens’s Michigan – it’s his vision based on his own experience and reflection that conveys his thoughts and reinforces them in listeners’ minds. This reconstruction of common myths that function in popular culture is a very significant process that can determine trends of societal thoughts – evolution or discovery of those thoughts, and the attitude towards particular places.

These reconstructions influence how one perceives locations. The *Michigan* LP is an example of the potential of those processes that can be applied to every other cultural text. Deep and insightful analysis of such texts can expose the structure, the process of constructing and the image of the place itself – what elements of landscape are highlighted, how the author comments on them, how one should understand these deliberate actions. The importance of this is extremely crucial, because it shapes the perception of world for any of us – users of popular cultural texts – which is synonymous with creating culture. And if they are creating culture, they alter human behavior towards such places, peoples’ opinions and actions, which leads to determining their relations, and in the end shaping the whole nation.

183 There is no such thing as “real” image of place. Every location is seen through lenses of one’s mind and is subjective. “Real” in this sense means that the image is more likely to be objective, which requires knowledge and acknowledgment of different perspectives and extensive knowledge about such place.

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Sufjan Stevens started his famous "The Fifty States Project" in 2003, the goal of which was to record an album about every state of the United States of America. He made two LPs about his two favorite states – Michigan and Illinois. The first album, simply titled "Michigan," was released in 2003. He constructed the image of Michigan from the point of view of a person who was born and grew up there, then migrated to New York City and was sentimental about the region of their childhood. Each song was a homage to the beloved home state, telling stories about places, people, cities and natural sites.

This LP is a very interesting piece that not only lets one study the way in which the author constructs the image of one's homeland, but also how he deconstructs the stereotypes, publicizes some regional issues, and at the same time promotes the state through music. Because of that, the main purpose of this book is to research Sufjan Stevens's album in the context of the image of the state of Michigan it represents.

Moreover, the analysis of "Michigan" provides valuable information about the popular culture in general – how instrumental can it be in shaping one's impression about a particular place, what is the role of the author of a specific cultural text, what artistic measures are used to construct such an impression, and what effects it may cause.



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