

<b>Institution:</b> University of Southampton		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 28 History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> 28-04 'Sweet Tooth': animating the archive of slavery through movement and sound.		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2007 – 2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Christer Petley	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Professor of Atlantic History	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> September 2007 – present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> November 2013 – July 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>A collaboration between University of Southampton historian Professor Christer Petley and performance artist Elaine Michener, <i>Sweet Tooth</i> (2017) is a 45-minute performance representing the brutal realities of slavery. Choreography and score drew on archival material relating to a slaveholder, Simon Taylor (1739-1813), which Petley uncovered as part of research into the history of slavery in the British Empire. Versions of <i>Sweet Tooth</i> have been showcased in a variety of settings, including places with clear historic connections to the transatlantic slave system. The premiere performance, in Liverpool, was broadcast by BBC Radio 3, and more than 530 people have attended a public showcasing of <i>Sweet Tooth</i>, in the UK and elsewhere. The project is a demonstration of the impact of historical scholarship on artistic practice, demonstrating how the two can unite to represent the past experience of slavery and its continuing legacies of violent trauma and inequality. It is a unique but inspirational example of such cross-disciplinary exchange; and similar works, inspired by its success, have since provoked new audiences to re-imagine the experiences and meanings of enslavement.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>In 2007, while producing his first monograph, <i>Slaveholders in Jamaica</i> [3.1], Petley began to focus on one of the region's most influential and wealthy slaveholders, the Jamaican sugar planter Simon Taylor. His research drew on two sets of sources: a probate inventory held in Spanish Town, Jamaica, produced on Taylor's death in 1813, and hundreds of Taylor's letters, now held in Cambridge and London. The former was a substantial document of more than 40 folio pages, including lists of 2,248 enslaved people among Taylor's 'property', some of them recorded as of 'no value'. Taylor's letters provided a rich, unparalleled record of a slaveholder's life, including his political ideas and private thoughts. An AHRC Early Career Fellowship awarded in 2011 enabled Petley to transcribe more than 160,000 of Taylor's words. Analysis of this corpus resulted in a suite of contributions to history journals that have illuminated many facets of the 'plantocracy'/slaveholders, including slaveholder identity [3.3], politics [3.4], material culture and attitudes towards enslaved people [3.5]. More recent outputs include a website showcasing excerpts from the Taylor letters, aimed at scholars, students and the general public, and a scholarly article re-evaluating a historical landmark: the 1807 abolition of the slave trade [3.6].</p> <p>The climax of this research was Petley's book <i>White Fury</i>, published in 2018 by Oxford University Press [3.2]—a signal contribution to the literature on British Caribbean slavery and the fall of the planter class. It draws principally on Taylor's letters and offers a new analysis of the British slave system, as well as of the political defeat of the planters at a time when revolutions in the Americas combined with abolitionism in Britain to bring about an end to the slave trade. A substantial part of the book explores the evidence from Taylor's probate inventory, shedding new light on the lives of those enslaved people whose labour underpinned Taylor's wealth and influence.</p>		

Scholarly reception of *White Fury* has been overwhelmingly favourable, with one review, by the historian Diana Paton, noting how its detailed interpretation of the Taylor archive represents a 'lasting contribution' to work on the 'politics of reactionary racism in the context of the slave trade debates'. Other historians of slavery and abolition describe the book as 'subtle, sensitive' (Trevor Burnard), 'original and provocative', 'revealing and persuasive' (James Walvin). Richard Huzzey, writing for the Institute of Historical Research Reviews in History, describes it as 'an exceptional book that will become a major point of reference for historians of the 18th-century Caribbean'. The book and its findings are also of interest to an audience beyond the academy, and it has been the subject of a 'History Hit' podcast, hosted by the broadcaster Dan Snow, as well as providing material for three recent popular history articles authored by Petley.

### 3. References to the research

**3.1** Christer Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica: Colonial Society and Culture during the Era of Abolition* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009). Available on request.

**3.2** Christer Petley, *White Fury: A Jamaican Slaveholder and the Age of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Listed in REF2.

**3.3** Christer Petley, "'Home" and "this country": Britishness and Creole Identity in the Letters of a Transatlantic Slaveholder', *Atlantic Studies* 6/1 (April 2009): 43-61.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810802696295>

**3.4** Christer Petley, "'Devoted islands" and "that madman Wilberforce": British Proslavery Patriotism during the Age of Abolition'. *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39/3 (September 2011): 393-415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2011.598744>

**3.5** Christer Petley, 'Plantations and Homes: The Material Culture of the Early Nineteenth-Century Jamaican Elite'. In Christer Petley and Steven Lenik (eds), 'Material Cultures of Slavery and Abolition', special issue of *Slavery & Abolition* 35/3 (2014): 437 – 57.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2014.944031>

**3.6** Christer Petley, 'Slaveholders and Revolution: The Jamaican Planter Class, British Imperial Politics, and the Ending of the Slave Trade, 1775–1807', *Slavery & Abolition* 39/1 (2018), pp. 53-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2017.1341015>

The research was supported by an AHRC Small Grant, 'The Identities of Slaveholders in the British Atlantic World: A Case Study of Simon Taylor' (119503/1) (June 2006 to April 2007), and by an AHRC Early-Career Fellowship, 'Rethinking the Decline of the British-Caribbean Planter Class' (AH/1027290/1) (October 2011 to June 2012).

### 4. Details of the impact

In November 2013, Elaine Mitchener contacted Petley, after watching a BBC4 documentary on Caribbean slavery in which he appeared as an expert commentator. She was interested in creating a new piece of performance art exploring the histories of sugar, slavery and connections between Jamaica and Britain. Born in London to parents who had emigrated to Britain from Jamaica, Mitchener is a well-known and highly regarded artist and performer. After an initial meeting in London, she and Petley continued to discuss the historical themes and creative ideas that would form *Sweet Tooth*. As that work began to take shape, they met again in London in February 2016, as well as in Southampton in December 2015 and April 2016.

From its inception *Sweet Tooth* drew heavily on archival documents, transcribed and interpreted by Petley during his research. As Mitchener puts it: 'The documents became my libretto' [5.6]. Petley's methods and findings also became integral to the developing piece. For instance, Petley and Mitchener discussed how Simon Taylor's probate inventory could be used to illuminate the lives of enslaved people, despite its obvious limitations as a document representing those people as property. Petley also shared observations about how Taylor's letters demonstrate the amplified anxiety and fury of British-Caribbean slaveholders during the Age of Revolution, including their growing fear of slave rebellions.

Having helped Mitchener to devise a premise for *Sweet Tooth*, Petley became the Historical Consultant for her project, working with the group that Mitchener assembled to develop and

perform the piece: instrumentalist Sylvia Hallett, percussionist Mark Sanders and saxophonist Jason Yarde. Mitchener, an experimental vocalist, was the main performer. Petley continued to provide detailed advice, offering his perspectives on how the work in progress evoked such themes as the Middle Passage and plantation labour, as well as the cultural adaptation, sexual exploitation, and resistance of enslaved people.

The most intensive period of creative development took place during the summer of 2016. Petley secured funding from the University of Southampton's Public Engagement with Research Unit for a three-day workshop, which allowed the group to meet with him at the Turner Sims concert hall between 27 and 29 June 2016. They tested ideas and showed Mitchener's work-in-progress to a public audience of 24 people. Mitchener then won Arts Council England funding for the project and a prestigious residency at Aldeburgh Music, between 6 and 11 August 2016. The residency brought Petley, Mitchener and the three other performers together with acclaimed choreographer Dan van Huynh. It closed with a sharing of the work to a paying audience of 40 [5.5].

#### *Impact on Artists*

Mitchener came to the project with 'a lay person's knowledge' of the history she wanted to portray. Petley's research-based understanding of historical themes and documentary source material was thus invaluable to *Sweet Tooth* and are woven through the work. For instance, Mitchener describes learning from Petley about how Taylor presented enslaved people in his letters as though they were pieces of machinery as 'a mustard seed moment'—'a real turning point' in her creative process [5.6]. People struggling to survive within a callously mechanistic system became a defining trope, repeatedly referenced, for example through Sanders' percussive clanking of wood on metal, in a scene evoking the physical inspection of an enslaved person as an item to be bought, and via choreography that reflected plantation labour discipline.

Transcriptions from the probate inventory and from the letters appear at two key points in the finished piece. During the middle section Mitchener recites names, primary occupations, and cash valuations of enslaved people (some of whom were listed as being 'of no value') from the inventory. It is a transformative moment—the first time in the piece that words are spoken. On one level, naming people in the familiar form of a rollcall reflects a functional document that enumerated people as 'property'. But as Mitchener remarks, her evocation of the names that were given to these enslaved people 'reminds us of their humanity'—and she does it to 'honour their memory', overturning the original purpose of the list [5.1, 5.2]. In the final section, Mitchener recites extracts of Taylor's letters, channelling bold mastery at first, but then, as Mitchener says, 'there is a fear that comes up': masterly confidence subtly melting away into anxious 'paranoia' [5.4]. Increasingly agitated and fragmented speech builds against a growing cacophony of sound, offering up a performance of a slave owner's growing fury, frustration, and fragility, as his investments are challenged by the prospect of slave rebellion.

#### *Impact on Audiences*

Following a further experimental showcasing as part of the 2016 Bloomsbury Festival, *Sweet Tooth* premiered at Liverpool's Bluecoat Centre for the Contemporary Arts (audience=109) on 23 November 2017, with subsequent performances at the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton (audience=133), and at the Museum of London, Docklands (audience=79), all of these numbers were close to, or at, full capacity for the venues. As of May 2020, more than 450 people had attended live performances of *Sweet Tooth* since its premiere [5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 5.13]. A recording of the Liverpool Bluecoat performance was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 30 December 2017 (available subsequently online), bringing the work to many more listeners, in the UK and beyond [5.2, 5.7]. The international premiere of the piece, at the Borealis Festival, Bergen, Norway, on 6 March 2020 (audience=150), was not only the first performance of *Sweet Tooth* outside the UK but also its first at a major music festival—a signal achievement for a piece that falls outside typical genre classifications [5.13].

*Sweet Tooth* is deliberately discomfiting and has provoked strong responses from audiences. Those attending a performance commented that the piece 'pushes the audience'. It is 'challenging - not comfortable listening'. Audience members attributed this to the fact that 'sound, music and historical reference [were] used perfectly together,' transporting them 'to an

uncomfortable but necessary space'. The reading from Petley's transcription of Taylor's probate inventory, which included references to those enslaved people who were recorded as being of 'no value' was particularly effective in this regard: 'hearing the list of names was the most powerful bit for me', noted a member of one audience, who was left 'bowled over by the thought of people with "no value".' Others agreed that the power of the piece owed much to the inclusion of 'chilling detail' from the archive [5.4, 5.5]. The Artistic Director of the Borealis Festival notes that the piece provided the audience with 'no room for ambivalence' and that the 'rooting of this work in careful historical research gave it a grounding and authority to speak artistically to a very real human situation', something that the Director of the John Hansard Gallery identifies as the outcome of a 'rich partnership between researcher and artist' [5.13, 5.9]. Mitchener also attests to the importance of that partnership, noting that, notwithstanding her work's abstract characteristics, it is important to her that there is 'nothing that's made up' [5.6].

#### *Impact on Institutions*

*Sweet Tooth* enabled a number of cultural institutions to acknowledge historical ties to the slave trade in a non-tokenistic fashion while engaging new audiences. The piece premiered in Liverpool, at one time Britain's biggest slaving port, at the city's Bluecoat theatre, whose 1717 building was funded by proceeds from the slave trade. The London Docklands venue was once a warehouse storing slave-produced Caribbean sugar. According to its Artistic Director, Bluecoat 'has the widest audience demographic of comparable cultural institutions in Liverpool,' and the audience for *Sweet Tooth* in 2017 ranged 'from students and academics to local history enthusiasts and people from the city's diverse communities' including 'new audiences'. He was struck by how 'the authenticity of the historical elements of the piece', such as the use of slaves' names and the words of a real slave owner, blended with the emotional interpretation of the performers, confronting the audience at 'both an intellectual and emotional level with a difficult past and its repercussions in the present'. The event, he emphasised, 'helped consolidate Bluecoat's positioning within the discursive environment around colonial legacies, locally and nationally', topics that also framed discussion of the piece at a public event, hosted by the International Slavery Museum the day after the premiere. This aspect of the work was also important to the organisers of the Bergen Borealis Festival. There *Sweet Tooth* drew a far more ethnically diverse audience than is usual for such an event. In the words of the Artistic Director, it facilitated a public discussion about race and exclusion that 'would not have been possible with a piece that was not itself so rooted in rigorous historical research'. [5.7, 5.13]

Mitchener has continued to apply the methods she developed with Petley to other, site-specific commissions. On 8 July 2019, she unveiled her new set of installations for English Heritage at Portchester Castle, Hampshire, which recite parts of historical lists and letters to evoke the site's history as a prison for captured former slaves from the French Caribbean during the Revolutionary Wars of the 1790s [5.10]. Mitchener has also developed a stand-alone solo piece [*Names*]—an extension of her work with Taylor's probate inventory, built around her incantation of the names listed in the document. This was first performed on 16 October 2016 at the Spill Festival, Ipswich [5.3] and subsequently exhibited as a sound installation at the John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, during November 2019. 'The retrieval and reciting of these names' is characterised by the Director of the Gallery as 'an act of defiant commemoration' [5.9], and visitors commented that the installation was 'poignant', 'heartbreaking, uncompromising', and 'powerfully relentless', with one remarking that the installation 'should be permanent' [5.12].

#### *Shifting and Sharing Academic and Artistic Practice*

The transfer of knowledge between Petley and Mitchener was a two-way process. Mitchener has praised Petley for embracing a process that deliberately required its participants 'to never feel comfortable' [5.4]. Petley was developing his own research on Simon Taylor and Jamaican slavery during the period when Mitchener was creating *Sweet Tooth*, and his writing and interpretation were influenced by the process. For example, part of one chapter of his 2018 research monograph, *White Fury*, developed from a report on one enslaved teenager's experience of being trafficked into Jamaica that he first wrote for Mitchener. A section of the conclusion echoes the middle part of *Sweet Tooth* by listing names, occupations, and values of enslaved people in Taylor's inventory, and other parts of the text channel Mitchener's inspiration in less obvious ways, seeking to evoke for readers an intimate and personalised sense of



slavery's horrors. Critical acclaim for the book as a 'marvellously evocative' account of its subject (Trevor Burnard, University of Hull) reflects the benefits to Petley of working with Mitchener.

*Sweet Tooth* arose from novel and innovative cross-disciplinary methods that continue to shape Mitchener's practice and have the potential to influence new work by other artists and performers. Because it relies in part on improvised performances and is adapted to the space of each venue, the piece remains a work in progress. It is one that has made a unique impression on all involved in its production. 'It's opened me up', writes Mitchener: 'I approach my work in a much more academic way'. One key difference of the work, according to the multi-instrumentalist on the project, Sylvia Hallett, lies in its creative engagement with the 'immutability' of archival traces. It is these, Hallett reflects, that have provided the work with 'a central core around which the stuff of imagination can weave new paths' [5.4, 5.11].

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

**5.1** For corroboration by Elaine Mitchener of objectives and impact, as well as links to music critics' reviews of *Sweet Tooth*: <http://www.elainemitchener.com/sweet-tooth>

**5.2** Mitchener discussing her work, including the collaboration with Petley, on BBC R3's "Hear and Now", 30 December 2017, Box of Broadcasts: <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/1052B69E?bcast=125818122> and PDF containing notes and quotations from the show.

**5.3** For evidence of *Sweet Tooth*'s role in inspiring the subsequent *Names* project, see: <https://blog.soton.ac.uk/slaveryandrevolution/2016/06/09/names>

**5.4** Report on 'Sweet Tooth Perspectives' event at Southampton (24 February 2018): Quotations and audience feedback.

**5.5** Report on Aldeburgh Music, August 2016: Information and a short video about Elaine Mitchener's residency, <https://snapemaltings.co.uk/project/elaine-mitchener-sweet-tooth>, the house programme, and details of audience feedback.

**5.6** m4a audio file of half-hour interview with Elaine Mitchener reflecting on *Sweet Tooth*, recorded on 3 July 2019. Quotes at 1'55, 11', 14'43, 27'12.

**5.7** Testimony on the impact of *Sweet Tooth* for the Liverpool Bluecoat Theatre Bryan Biggs, Artistic Director, Liverpool Bluecoat, 29 August 2019.

**5.8** London Docklands Audience Feedback.

**5.9** Testimony from the Director of the John Hansard Gallery, 19 September 2019.

**5.10** Information on Portchester installation, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about-us/search-news/portchester-new-sound-installation>

**5.11** Testimony from *Sweet Tooth* instrumentalist, Sylvia Hallett, 29 February 2020.

**5.12** Anonymous public feedback on *[Names]* from John Hansard Gallery, 22-23 November 2019.

**5.13** Testimony from the Artistic Director of the Borealis Festival, Bergen, 1 May 2020.