



Why I Free Slaves: Researcher Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick

Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick asks big questions. *Who are we? What do we want to make of life?* In both the most concrete and broadest sense—the historical reckoning of slavery and emancipation—*how do we want to be judged?*

“We need to widen our lens,” Choi-Fitzpatrick says. We need to see slavery as a critical contemporary issue affecting tens of millions of people worldwide; we also need to zoom out and ask ourselves, *“Who counts as human?”* In his anti-slavery activism and staunch support of Free the Slaves, he thinks deeply about that.

“I free slaves through observing the activities by which communities can mobilize, organize, find power, and bring their own freedom to their own communities and families.”

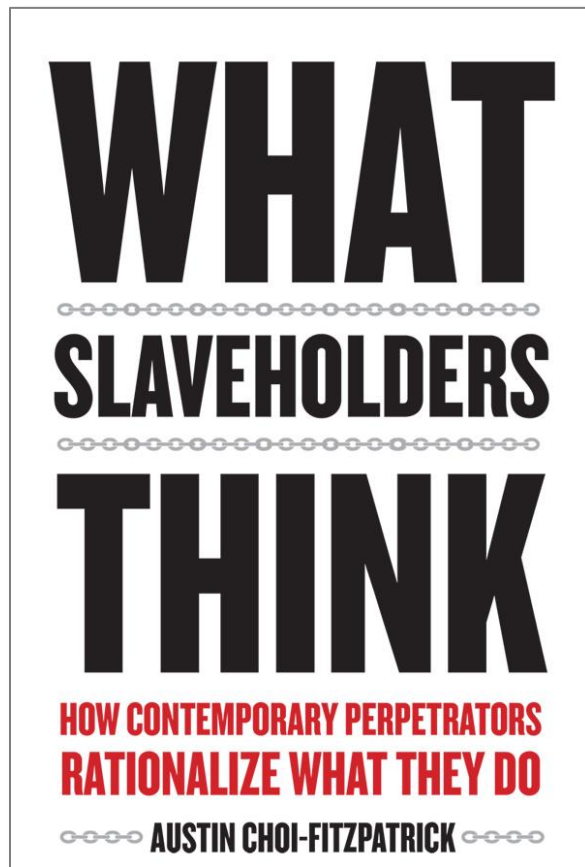


As a researcher, scholar, writer and educator, Choi-Fitzpatrick has dedicated his career to unpacking the issues of slavery, to looking, as he calls it, at the “big warp and woof of history.” *Where are we in this anti-slavery moment?* His fierce curiosity demands answers, and gives him an unusual perspective.

A New View of Slavery

How can I help?

Choi-Fitzpatrick first discovered modern slavery almost two decades ago. “I was riven,” he remembers. “I was struck—by the enormity of the situation, by a sense that something had to be done.” He found Free the Slaves and committed his time and resources. He is donating royalties from his recent book to support our critical community-based work. He dedicates himself to this cause for two reasons: immediate needs on the ground, and the reality of



modern slavery as a shared human experience. Slavery is the product of a particular society and set of circumstances.

“We need to better understand the lives of both perpetrators and survivors,” Choi-Fitzpatrick says, “what whole communities look like.”

At the [University of San Diego's Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies](#), Choi-Fitzpatrick focuses on culture, politics and social change, especially the manifold, radical ways society must address its core evils. The more he thought about individual souls being trapped and oppressed, the more he thought about individuals on the other side of the equation: not just the enslaved but the enslaver. His recent book, [What Slaveholders Think: How Contemporary Perpetrators Rationalize What They Do](#), tackles slavery in a bold new way.

In India, Choi-Fitzpatrick spent months interviewing hundreds of people—slaveholders, victims, community members, local activists—about slavery and emancipation. *What Slaveholders Think* tells original stories of slavery from perpetrators' perspectives. Choi-Fitzpatrick neither justifies nor excuses crimes and abuse—his work sheds new light on the totality of the slavery relationship between people within a community.

In Choi-Fitzpatrick's vision, emancipation looks complicated. “It looks possible, but it's complicated,” he says. “How we get there relies on us having a fuller picture of all the actors involved.” His assessment brings fresh scrutiny to an ancient, intractable issue. He hopes a new view of slavery will give us better tools for understanding emancipation, and how we can help communities come out of slavery together.

Perpetrators Speak

Why does this happen over and over?

Abolitionist movements are hundreds of years old, and slavery still perplexes. “We can’t come to real, clear, whole answers without considering perpetrators,” Choi-Fitzpatrick insists. “We’ve got to go out and talk to the bad guys.”

Who are the bad guys?

Slaveholders are not just villains, so their stories can be hard to tell. But perpetrators play an important role in this story. An impoverished grain farmer told Choi-Fitzpatrick he could only make his harvest by using bonded labor. Funded by a small loan from an international development agency, he and his family live on the knife-edge of economic ruin.



Book launch benefit for Free the Slaves 2017

“It’s a horrible situation for everybody involved,” Choi-Fitzpatrick says. “These are complicated lives lived by complicated people, who do things for complicated reasons. And it gets more complicated when we ask ourselves about our mutual funds, the cotton in our clothes, facilities that manufacture our textiles.” Choi-Fitzpatrick has one challenge for himself, simple yet profoundly difficult: Don’t be a slaveholder.

Answers Demand Action

If this is the nature of the problem, what's the nature of the solution?

Do you want to be part of a process that has deep historical roots, that is tied to our earliest understandings of what it means to be human, to be free?

Then actually make that promise good?

Anti-slavery efforts, rightly, first treat victims. But they may also characterize slaveholders one-dimensionally, as criminals alone. Confronting slavery means taking its full measure, not one-half of it. Complicated problems require sophisticated solutions: communitywide efforts that truly address poverty, inequality, vulnerability, ignorance and human rights violations.

Choi-Fitzpatrick supports Free the Slaves because that is exactly the fieldwork we do. "I give to Free the Slaves because it addresses the problem as it actually is. It recognizes slavery is fundamentally a human relationship between a perpetrator and a victim, and it's embedded in community. People want to know, is there an answer for this? It's nice to be able to say that there is."



Join Us to Finish the Fight

What's necessary to close the deal on freedom?

Icons of abolition, among them Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, were pioneers of emancipation legislatively, legally and politically. Now we are tasked to fight slavery not just superficially, clinically, but also fundamentally. To Choi-Fitzpatrick that means major cultural, social, and economic investments that render slavery illegal and unthinkable, as well as untenable and impossible.



"Laws are the first step," Choi-Fitzpatrick says. "But action that actually reduces inequality and poverty—that's what's going to end slavery for good." He wants to be on the winning side of history, to be part of a movement that actually did something.

"We can say we got closer and closer—and then we did it. People should join us. If you want to be part of history, of hundreds of years of a story that has the ability to write its own conclusion, now...I'd be part of that."



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We Don't Free Slaves, You Do!**