This talk pursues one thread in the ongoing, multigenerational struggle for emancipation among former plantation workers and other members of the rural underclass in Bahia, Brazil. People’s efforts to build substantive forms of human equality and freedom require them to work upon various material, dispositional, and categorical dimensions of social life. The experience of “fear” has often been recognized as one constitutive dimension in relations of domination and subordination, and therefore overcoming “fear” has often been understood as a crucial step in undermining asymmetrical and pathological social relations. Drawing upon extensive ethnographic research in several squatter and land reform communities that emerged in Bahia’s cacao lands in the 1990s, the presentation focuses on the work that people do with “fear” as they critically engage received social categories of “authority” and “respect.” Examining a range of evidence—including retrospective narratives about the limits of hierarchy, the performative work of imagining oneself acting and speaking as an equal, and refusals to participate in patriarchal and paternalistic relationships—this talk explores the ongoing work of emancipation as members of the rural underclass seize upon and critically engage various dimensions of their own lives in order to transform what and who they are.