

Enslaved Africans Do Not Count As Immigrants

Let’s file this one under “Things we shouldn’t have to explain.”

 Ben Carson, the new secretary of housing and urban development, portrayed enslaved Africans as immigrants during a speech to the agency’s employees on Monday.

Yes, he called people who were enslaved “immigrants.” No, this isn’t a joke.

“That’s what America is about,” Carson said. “A land of dreams and opportunity. There were other immigrants who came here in the bottom of slave ships, worked even longer, even harder for less. But they too had a dream that one day their sons, daughters, grandsons, granddaughters, great grandsons, great granddaughters might pursue prosperity and happiness in this land.”

Sure, enslaved Africans had dreams of “prosperity and happiness” – and freedom – but Carson’s quote makes it seem as though they came to America to provide their children with a level of well-being they otherwise couldn’t give them.

Enslaved Africans had no choice in coming to the U.S. or deciding how they would lead their lives once they arrived (in other places, like this [Vox article mapping America’s history of immigration](#), enslavement is falsely categorized as “forced migration”). They were kidnapped, transported to America under deplorable conditions, sold like livestock and placed on plantations to work grueling hours for *nothing* in return. They were routinely beaten, killed, raped and tortured by slave masters and their families. Their attempts to escape or rebel were violently thwarted and, if enslaved Africans were able to obtain freedom, they still lived their lives as a second-class citizens.

Carson’s choice of words romanticizes the horrors of African enslavement and the subsequent struggles black Americans faced. Slavery’s legacy in the U.S. led to generations of black people being lynched, disenfranchised and barred from attaining the political, social and economic capital held by their white peers.

Aside from being nonsensical, Carson’s comment plays into the bigger problem of glossing over the history of people of color in America by painting the U.S. as a thriving “nation of immigrants” – as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, an activist and author, pointed out for [Monthly Review Zine](#) in 2006.

“Misrepresenting the process of European colonization of North America, making everyone an immigrant, serves to preserve the ‘official story’ of a mostly benign and benevolent USA, and to mask the fact that the pre-U.S. independence settlers, were, well, settlers – colonial settlers, just as they were in Africa and India, or the Spanish in Central and South America,” she wrote.

“So, let’s stop saying ‘this is a nation of immigrants.’”

Yes, let’s – so I can stop writing articles about something as simple as enslavement not being a choice.