Where do you go to buy most of your food? A supermarket? A dollar store? A fast food joint? Does it feel clean and inviting? Is the food fresh? Are you treated with respect? Your answers to these questions provide a snapshot of where you are in the retail food system. The truth of the matter is that we have a segregated food system. Our access to healthy food often depends on where we live, how much money we can spend and how the corporate food industry perceives us.

At Praxis, we call this the Jim Crow food system. Jim Crow is a pejorative term to describe a system of legal and de facto segregation in the United States that created legacies of privilege and wealth for whites by centuries of slavery and exploitation of African descendants, indigenous nations and immigrants deemed to be non white. Like its original namesake, Jim Crow Food exploits lower income, mostly communities of color and privileges higher income, predominantly white communities. In fact, it is built on the original legacy of Jim Crow – inequities in wealth, housing, education – to normalize inequity in food access and make it seem as if these gaps are a result of consumer choice.

How does the Jim Crow Food system work? Our food system is segregated throughout every aspect of its operation – from production, to its marketing, to availability and beyond. Who owns the land, who works the land, who stocks the shelves, who gets to see what products where, are all contextualized by race, income and class. Our food retail system operates along three tiers of access – the concierge level where great food is available at high prices for those willing and able to make the investment; the big middle where most of our markets operate across a continuum of quality from better to bad; and the discount level where consumers have limited food offerings at dollar stores or other liquidators that resell items that markets cannot sell for a variety of reasons, including expired goods and other items that often would have been donated to food banks. The differences in quality and access are vast – even within the same food chains – and it simply isn’t right.

Food is a human right. We all need healthy food to thrive. This Food Day, let’s hold the food industry accountable to fair food standards so that everyone has what they need to eat well, no matter where they live or how much money they have.

AyeNay Abye
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