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Under the Skin

The Hidden Toll of Racism
on Health in America

By Linda Villarosa

Anchor

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“*Under the Skin* makes a powerful case that the systematic assault on Black Americans’ bodies is unhealthy for the entire nation. Based on decades of cutting-edge investigative reporting, Villarosa shines a fresh spotlight on this urgent crisis and offers a promising path to health equity.”

—Dorothy Roberts, author of *Killing the Black Body*

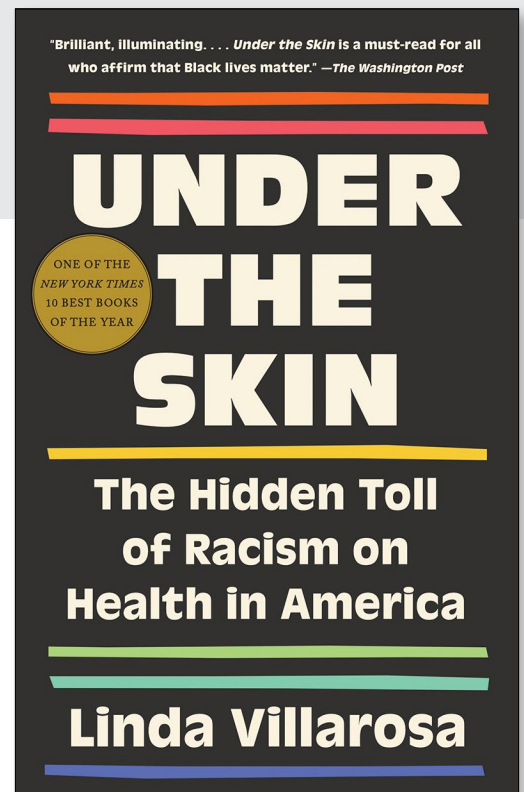
ABOUT THE BOOK

Under the Skin is a landmark book that tells the full story of racial health disparities in America, revealing the toll racism takes on individuals and the health of the nation.

Linda Villarosa lays bare the forces in the American health-care system and in American society that cause Black people to “live sicker and die quicker” compared to their white counterparts. She also describes the new understanding that coping with the daily scourge of racism ages Black people prematurely. Anchored by unforgettable human stories and offering incontrovertible proof, *Under the Skin* is necessary reading.

Under the Skin is the winner of the J. Anthony Lukas Book Prize, finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, finalist for the NYPL Bernstein Award, and an NAACP Literary Non-Fiction Award Nominee.

First-Year and Common Reading Guide



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda Villarosa is a journalism professor at the City University of New York and a contributing writer at the *New York Times Magazine*, where she covers the intersection of race and health. She has also served as executive editor at *Essence* and as a science editor at *The New York Times*. Her article on maternal and infant mortality was a finalist for a National Magazine Award. She is a contributor to *The 1619 Project*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does poverty influence who has access to quality health care? How does racial discrimination and bias contribute to disparities in health care? How did Linda Villarosa's thinking about racial disparities in health care shift over time? How did her opinions on systemic bias change while witnessing her father's treatment for colon cancer and dementia?
2. What did the *Relf v. Weinberger* lawsuit reveal about sterilization under U.S. government programs? How were the Relfs targeted based on their race, class, and intellectual abilities? What interventions could have protected them?
3. How does the history of medicine in the U.S. demonstrate that its roots are in slavery? How is this reflected today in how Black people are treated, how their pain is managed, and how they receive care? What can be done to reconcile this history within health care?
4. What did Villarosa witness while Simone Landrum was giving birth in New Orleans, with support from Latona Giwa? How was Landrum treated during this birth, and during previous pregnancies? What is the role of a doula and how do they provide much-needed maternal care? How can doulas be better protected and supported?
5. How were residents of Walnut Cove in Stokes County, North Carolina harmed by Duke Energy? Why were the county's poor and Black residents disproportionately harmed? How was Danielle Bailey harmed? How did local activists battle for better living conditions? Why are activists of color, like Danielle and her neighbors, often left out of the environmental movement?
6. How is Black mental health care affected by racist stereotypes, assumptions, and stigma? What are some of the vulnerabilities that arise from untreated mental illness? What effect does this have on Black men? Children? Teenagers?
7. Why is mental illness often treated as a crime? How does this criminalization disproportionately impact Black people? Why is drug use criminalized in the United States? What alternatives exist or should be created?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
(CONTINUED)**

8. Why was Diamond Village in West Virginia established? How did the SOAR (Solutions Oriented Addiction Response) program prevent overdoses in Charleston? Why are harm reduction programs like these often created in the absence of government support? Why are these programs often targeted for police raids and criminalization?
9. How did the HIV/AIDS virus disproportionately impact Black people in America? How do community health workers (CHWs) like Cedric Sturdevant address some of the racial health disparities? Why are CHWs underutilized, underpaid, and poorly supported in the United States? How do you think CHWs should be supported and protected?
10. How are health extension workers (HEWs) an integral part of Ethiopia's health care system? How do HEW programs support young women like Aster Roba? How do HEW programs contribute to declines in maternal and child mortality rates around the world? How could the United States benefit from more programs that utilize community health workers?
11. Why is the mortality rate for Black babies influenced by the race of their doctor? Why do you think the mortality rate for white babies is largely unaffected by the doctor's race? How can programs, such as Perinatal Quality Collaboratives, improve hospital practices? What are some of the limitations of these programs?
12. How are doctors' decisions shaped by their internal bias? What are some of the recent and current medical school interventions that attempt to address racism within health care? What other interventions do you think should be made?
13. How did the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate that epidemics do discriminate based on race? How did you witness patterns of marginalization, bias, and inequality during the pandemic? Why do the conditions of social and physical environments—also known as social determinants of health—have an outsized influence on health outcomes?
14. How did America's racial reckoning and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerate awareness of the history and racism in the U.S.? Why is now the time for transformative change in health, health care, and health equity? What actions do you think should be taken first? What actions can you take?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. UNDER THE SKIN

As a group, read the epigraph from the book:

*Underneath my skin
There are layers of pain
Simmering endlessly
Every day
I am seconds away from cracking*

—“Breaking Point,” U-Meleni Mhlaba-Adebo

Respond to the following questions:

- Why do you think Villarosa chose this epigraph for her text?
- Who is U-Meleni Mhlaba-Adebo and why do you think Villarosa chose to use one of her poems?
- What are some of the meanings of the book’s title, *Under the Skin*?

2. POETRY BY U-MELENI MHLABA-ADEBO

Read U-Meleni Mhlaba-Adebo’s story, beginning on page 84. In small groups, read her poems “Have You Ever” (page 86), “Poem for Jabu” (page 87), and “Her Body Is a Weapon” (page 106). Respond to the following questions:

- What truths about being a Black woman in America and a daughter of immigrant Africans does Mhlaba-Adebo reveal in her poetry?
- What did Mhlaba-Adebo experience during her pregnancies?
- How can poetry, like Mhlaba-Adebo’s work, be used as a tool to describe the pain, trauma, and inequities that exist within health care?

3. EVERYDAY DISCRIMINATION SCALE

In pairs, review and respond to the “Everyday Discrimination Scale,” created by Dr. David Williams: <https://prhlink.com/davidwilliams>

After pairs share their initial responses, invite the larger group to share some of the ways that racism shows up in their everyday lives.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

4. MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND MARK MCMULLEN

As a large group, discuss Mark McMullen's story, beginning on page 142. Ask participants to respond to the following questions:

- How was McMullen's life complicated by drug use and mental illness?
- Why was McMullen shot to death by police? What happened to the police officers who killed McMullen?
- What interventions could have supported McMullen and possibly saved his life?

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

1. GOVERNMENT-SANCTIONED STERILIZATION

Villarosa shares some of the circumstances where women have been sterilized under government programs, including in Puerto Rico, North Carolina and in California women's prisons (beginning on page 39). Research more about this history, beginning with the PBS Independent Lens' resource, "Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States": <https://prhlink.com/pbsblog>

2. MATERNAL MORTALITY RATES

Learn more about maternal mortality rates in your state and in your county. What organizations, community health programs, and maternal support programs exist to support birthing people? What actions are organizers and birth workers demanding to support higher and healthier birth rates?

3. REDLINING AND ENVIRONMENTAL INEQUALITY

Read the National Community Reinvestment Coalition's report, "Redlining and Neighborhood Health": <https://prhlink.com/ncrcorg>. How has your community been affected by redlining? Are the conditions of predominantly Black communities in your area different from those of predominantly white communities? Who is most at risk of housing instability, inequitable access to resources, and unhealthy living conditions?

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

1. WHERE YOU LIVE MATTERS

What are the most pressing environmental issues in your community? Who is advocating for clean air, clean water, and safer neighborhoods? Identify a local organization working to make your community safer and more livable for all people. Volunteer your time to help campaign, phone bank, or meet with local politicians.

2. MENTAL HEALTH CARE

What free or low-cost mental health care resources exist in your community? Interview a staff member from a local program and identify ways to support their outreach to people in need. Consider creating and distributing flyers, social media posts, or tabling at a local community event to increase access to resources and services.

3. HARM REDUCTION AND COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

Research the harm reduction or community health worker programs that exist in your community. Who is supporting people struggling with addiction? Consider volunteering your time to support mobile outreach, needle exchange, or HIV testing.

4. THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN: A NATIONAL CALL FOR MORAL REVIVAL

Learn more about the national work of the Poor People's Campaign. Browse the resources on their site and find your state's committee at <https://prhlink.com/takeaction>. Attend a local event and sign up for local action alerts.

OTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PROGRAMS

1. Read "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis" by Linda Villarosa in *The New York Times Magazine*: <https://prhlink.com/blackmothersnyt>
2. Read "Black Lives Are Shorter in Chicago. My Family's History Shows Why" by Linda Villarosa in *The New York Times Magazine*: <https://prhlink.com/lifeexpectancynyt>

OTHER RESOURCES
FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS,
AND PROGRAMS
(CONTINUED)

3. Read “A Terrible Price’: The Deadly Racial Disparities of Covid-19 in America” by Linda Villarosa in *The New York Times Magazine*: <https://prhlink.com/covid19nyt>
4. Read more of Linda Villarosa’s work: <https://www.lindavillarosa.com/my-work>
5. Read the PBS “Faces of Depression” interview with Terrie Williams: <https://prhlink.com/depressionpbs>
6. Read the report “Breath to the People: Sacred Air and Toxic Pollution,” prepared for the United Church of Christ by the Environmental Integrity Project: <https://prhlink.com/breathtothepeople>
7. Read Mustafa Santiago Ali’s resignation letter to EPA’s Administrator Scott Pruitt: <https://prhlink.com/epadocument>
8. Visit The Lilies Project, a public art project in Walnut Cove, created by Caroline Rutledge Armijo in memory of Danielle Bailey-Lash: <https://theliliesproject.org/>
9. Listen to “Making the Case that Discrimination Is Bad for Your Health,” an interview with Arlene Geronimus, on NPR’s *Code Switch* podcast: <https://prhlink.com/nprcodeswitch>
10. Learn more about the #whitecoats4blacklives movement: <https://whitecoats4blacklives.org/>

ABOUT THIS GUIDE’S WRITER

Rachael Zafer is a writer, community organizer, and social change consultant. She provides creative and technical consulting to people and organizations across the United States. Rachael is the author of discussion guides for over thirty books, including *Poverty, by America* by Matthew Desmond, and *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee. You can view her guides at www.rachaelzafer.com.

