UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

June 26, 2026

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New book documents Black gay men rejecting the burdens of stigma

Baltimore native Terrell Winder graduated from Columbia University before heading to UCLA for grad school. Right away he picked up on the differences between his historically Black hometown upbringing and the more sprawling realities for young Black gay men across Greater Los Angeles. An ethnographer by training, Winder, who joined UC Santa Barbara's Department of Sociology in 2019, dove into the details.

This month, his years of research became available in book form, "Shameless: The Making of Black Gay Identities in LA," published by NYU Press.

To close out Pride Month, The Current caught up with Winder to talk about the project and how it's been received.

What was the seed of the book?

Terrell Winder: As a graduate student at UCLA, I was working on research about Black gay and queer populations and was often met with the misconception that my research was solely focused on HIV due to the overemphasis of this issue among Black men who have sex with men. In response, it was important to me to highlight the ways that young Black gay men were learning to navigate these types of stigmas associated with their racial and sexual identities in everyday life.

It also became increasingly clear that how these young men were growing up in Los Angeles was quite different from my own journey growing up in Baltimore.

How so?

The biggest differences were that Los Angeles was a much larger metropolitan area in terms of size and population. This meant that they had greater access to community services, such as queer community organizations. But at the same time, L.A.’s large geographic area was much harder to traverse.

Also, while L.A. had a well-known ‘gayborhood’ — West Hollywood — Baltimore did not. Baltimore was also a majority Black city while historic Black neighborhoods in L.A. were rapidly becoming less Black over time. These differences stood out to me as I conducted my research as someone studying racial and sexual identity.

These differences became the seed for the book as I questioned the importance of how one's geographic location impacts the formation of their racial and sexual identity. For me, this book was an opportunity to elevate the stories of other Black gay men who were finding unique ways to reject the burden of stigma.

At book events, what feedback are you getting from your audiences?

They have been recognizing the importance of elevating stories of marginalized groups, especially in this moment when many institutions and groups are trying to obscure racial, sexual and gendered inequities in our society.

What else?

One question that has stuck with me was from an audience member at an event at the West Hollywood Library who asked what my hope was for the impact of the book. I've been thinking about this ever since. I return to a quote by the late author and LGBTQ activist Joseph Beam, ‘Visibility is survival.’

The conversations have been an opportunity for me to highlight how important it is to collect, analyze and publicize experiences of queer people of color, especially Black queer people as evidence in the research record of their experiences and resistance to dominant stereotypes.

Where does it land in the context of Pride Month?

Publishing the book for Pride Month has been particularly rewarding as it has been an opportunity to highlight how we might think about the importance of pride and visibility in the fight for continued equity for LGBTQ people and communities. A lot of my thinking and focus in the book is about how Black gay men (and other marginalized groups) reject stigma and eventually find pride in those same identities.

Sometimes I think with how wonderfully visible pride celebrations have been in recent years we forget that not all people start off feeling that pride or even acceptance for certain identities. The book was a chance to re-center our conversation on the relationship that stigmatized people have with their own stigmatized identities instead of focusing on how they simply navigate stigma for the comfort of others. Rather than just accepting stigma as a perpetual condition, the rejection of the burden of stigma can lead to pride, confidence and joy from a renewed space of appreciation for your identity.

Anything you'd like to add?

I was drawn to UCSB because we have one of the leading sociology departments specializing in race, gender and sexualities in the country. My own interest in understanding how people are simultaneously navigating racial and sexual stigmas fits nicely with my department and campus colleagues studying similar topics. Joining the faculty here has been a great opportunity for my research and public scholarship.

At 6 p.m. on August 18 at Chaucer's Books in Santa Barbara, Winder will be in conversation with Jane Ward, professor and chair of UCSB's Department of Feminist Studies.

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