



Banned Books, Censorship and the Right to Read Movement

Panelists:

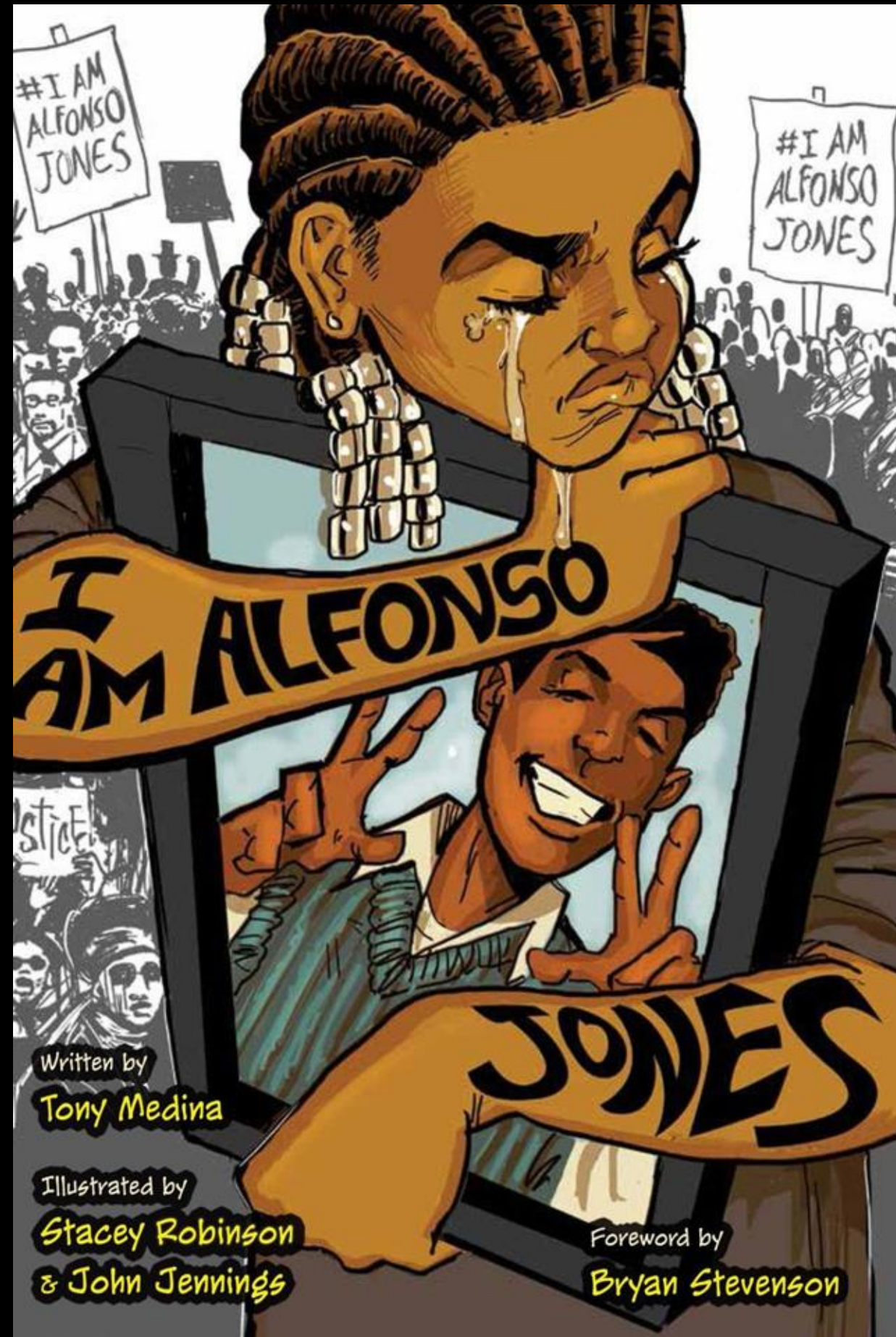
Elisia Janaee Ayala, Gabriel Bencosme, Areti Siskos,
Cordelia McDonald, and Professor Mariposa Fernandez

Excellence in Education Community Conference 2026
“Moving the Needle: From Practice to Impact”

Friday, April 17, 2026



LEHMAN



I Am Alfonso Jones

by Tony Medina

“Grief is just love with no place to go”
-Jamie Anderson

I Am Alfonso Jones by Tony Medina is a graphic novel about the impact the loss of a the life, a 15 year old boy to police brutality. This novel touches on themes of grief, loss, justice, love, community, and much more.

Impactful Moments

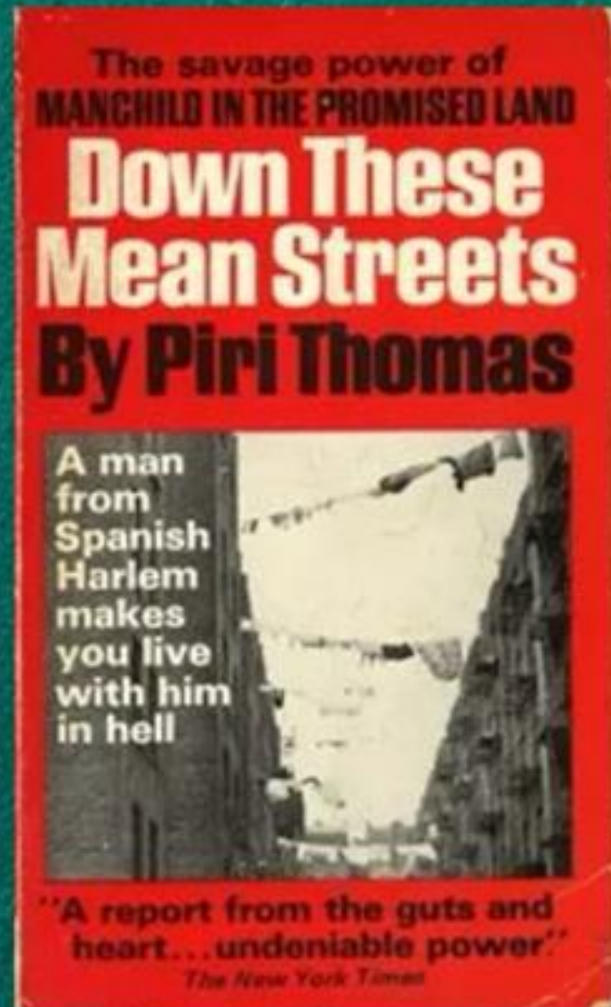
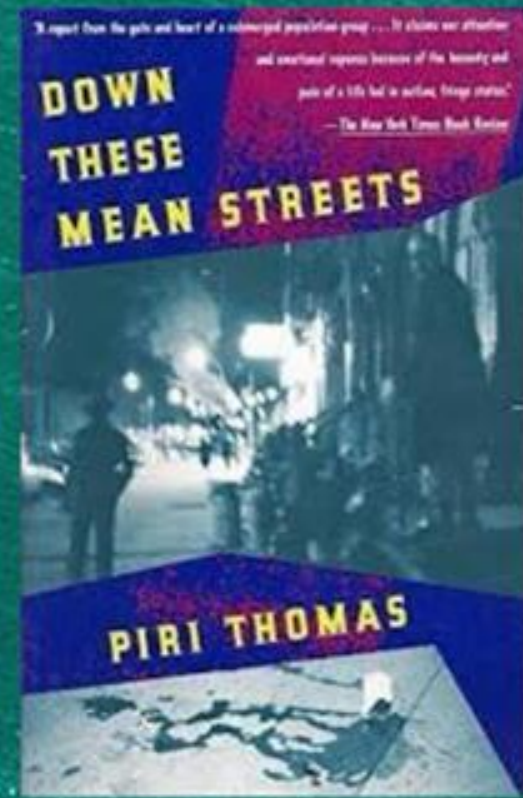
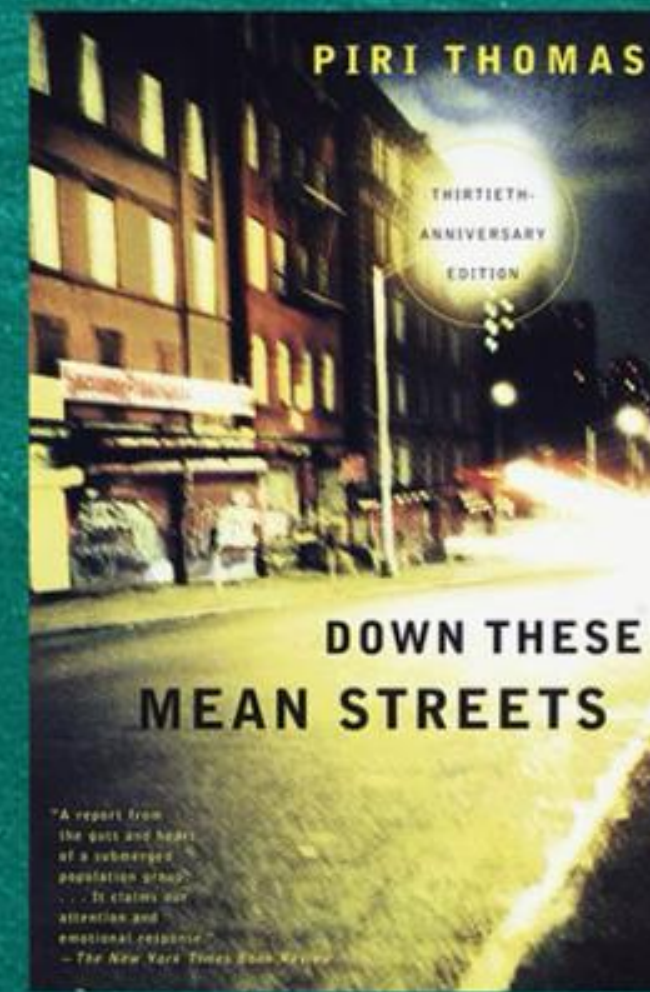
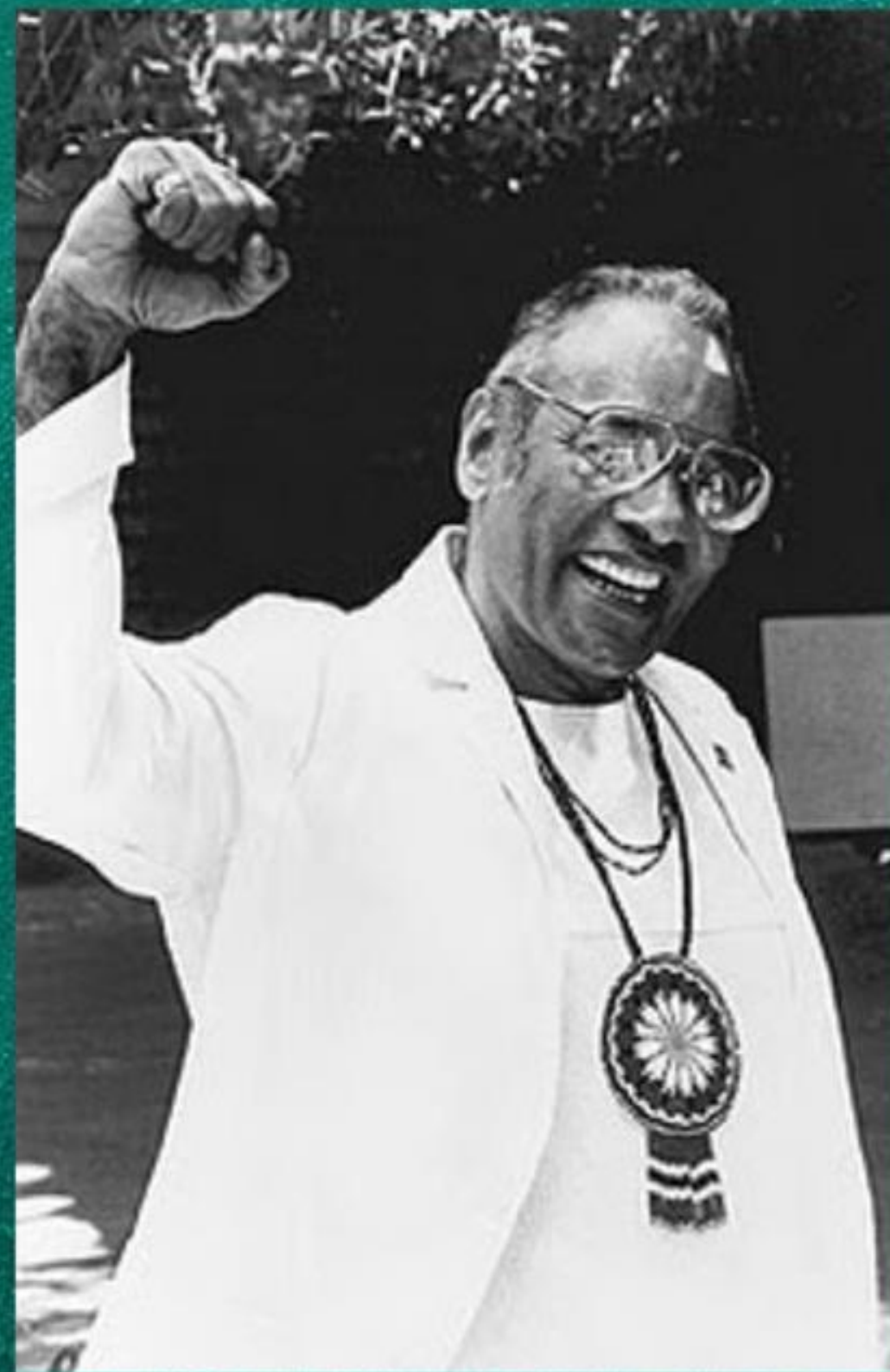
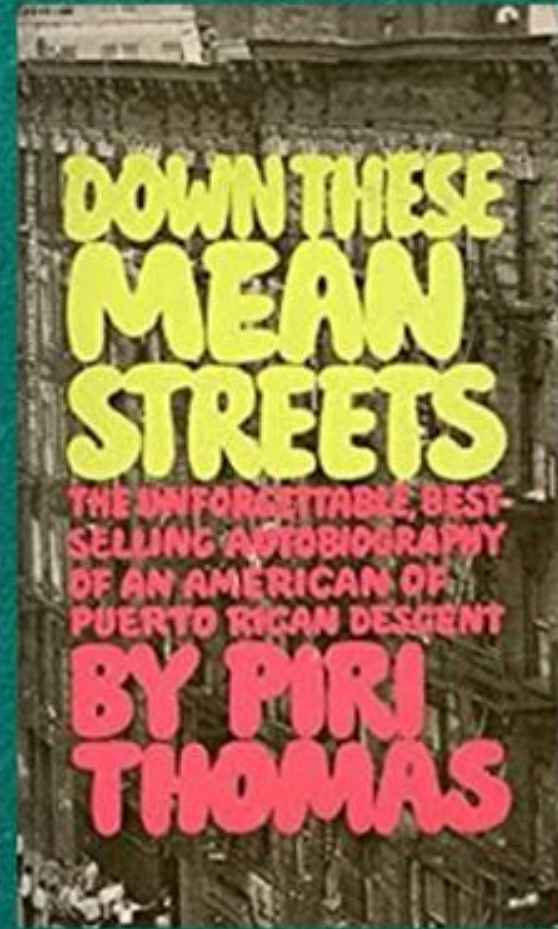
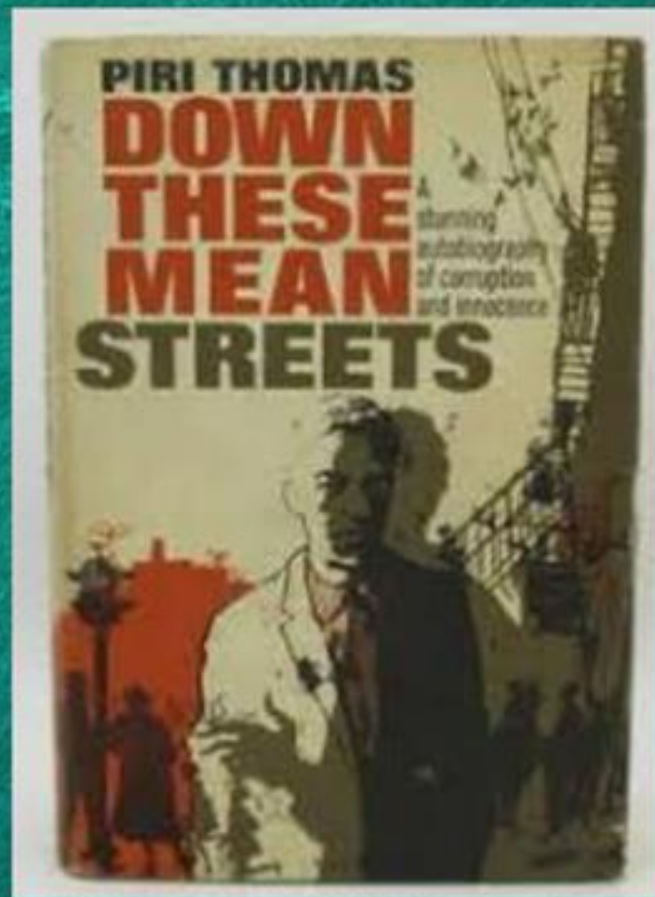
- The juxtaposition between who the reader comes to know Alfonso Jones is versus who the media tries to portray him as after his death.
- Multi-dimensional Characters
- Various displays of grief and how this process affects people differently
- The portrayal of trauma while also portraying joy representing the totality of the Black Experience



Why Do Books Like This Matter?

- Identification
 - Introducing students to books that include characters and communities that they identify with creates a stronger sense of community.
- Validation
 - Through literature that shows depth of emotion students are able to learn how to accept their own emotions.
- Consideration
 - Through a wide range of authors and perspectives in literature students are able to develop a stronger sense of empathy.





Piri Thomas was a groundbreaking Puerto Rican-Cuban American writer whose classic memoir *Down These Mean Street* gave voice to race, Afro Latine identity, colonialism, life in El Barrio, incarceration and personal transformation.

The book continues to be challenged by parents and school boards and students and readers continue to resist



Ban on Book Splits a School District in Queens

Continued From Page 71

Streets" indicate they do so not so much because it portrays life in New York's Puerto Rican community as because the portrayal includes vulgarities and descriptions of sexual acts.

Mrs. Florence Grimm, a 37-year-old mother of two children attending public school and another in parochial school, was one of only five speakers who defended the ban Wednesday night. She said:

"I want my children to have social awareness and I want them to know what they can do to correct social ills. But they are not ready to be exposed to sexual perversion [as depicted in the Thomas book]. My daughter hasn't even studied normal sex yet. The book does not belong on a school library shelf."

Another speaker, Thomas McCarthy, a suburban newspaperman, said of those who favor restoring "Down These Mean Streets" to an open library shelf: "This group makes itself my enemy because it is the enemy of my children's childhood. They are the destroyers of innocence."

Parental Approval Urged

The school board majority (the five members who approved the ban and sponsored the parent option plan rather than rescind the ban) said in a recent statement that "the difference between the minority members and us on this question (whether to restrict the availability of the book) is very clear."

"They [the board minority] want to engage in a grandstand play at saving a book from being burned where there is no fire," the statement said. "We want to work with parents to save children from being burned by the very real fire that can come from premature exposure to raw scenes that can sear their young hearts and minds."

Thomas J. Dillon, who is a lawyer and a retired deputy



The New York Times

Piri Thomas

Mike Sloan, the District 25 representative of the United Federation of Teachers, says that his organization is against the ban. The Presidents Council of District 25, a body that includes the presidents of the parents associations of all 28 schools in the district, fought the ban and has requested the New York Civil Liberties Union to initiate litigation to remove it.

Contributing to the district's polarization is the fact that two weeks before they voted to ban the book, the five members of the board majority approved a resolution calling on the state to aid nonpublic schools.

Four of the five majority members, all four of them Roman Catholics, ran for office on a slate sponsored by the Home School Association, a parents' organization of the Catholic parochial schools. Thus, some District 25 residents concede they are openly suspicious of the board majority's motives and feel their suspicions were confirmed when the board called for aid to nonpublic schools.

leader, is now a unit supervisor in the city Welfare Department and a lawyer. He is the fifth member of the majority.

One of the criticisms of the board majority has revolved around the fact that none of them has a child attending a public school under the board's jurisdiction.

Some supporters of the board majority refer to it as "the Holy Five." A newer name, "the Faithful Five," was given to the majority at the Wednesday night meeting by the Commander of the Queens County chapter of the Catholic War Veterans, Robert G. Goff, who spoke in behalf of the majority.

Consistently voting as a minority bloc on the board have been Mrs. Betty-Louise Felton, a field representative of the United Parents Associations and a housewife; Mrs. Edna Turner, a junior at Queens College and a housewife; James L. O'Hara, assistant business manager, Local 3, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and Hyman Rosner, office manager-administrator at Queens Social Service Center.

Mr. Rosner is the school board's president and Mrs. Felton is its only black member.

Religious Split Feared

Mrs. Turner, a Catholic and a member of the board minority, has five children in public schools. She is concerned that the conflict in District 25 will turn parochial-school parent against public-school parent.

Mrs. Turner called "Down These Mean Streets" a beautiful book—full of feelings.

"I see it as a learning tool," she said. "The author was willing to expose his gut feelings so we could better understand the problems he faced. It promotes understanding."

To Mr. Rosner, the ban that has been imposed on the book is "symbolic of something deeper."

"It is a matter of not permitting educators to feel free to apply their creativity and imagination," he said. "The act of banning the book is a dangerous first step which will adversely affect the climate of academic freedom. It may serve to intimidate teachers and supervisors."

The author of the book, Mr. Thomas, said in an interview that he finds any kind of limitation on the availability of his book to junior high school pupils unacceptable.

"It is not just Piri Thomas and 'Down These Mean Streets' that is at stake," he said. "This is a matter of basic constitutional rights. It is an insult to those of junior high school age to deny them the right to read the book. They don't have to pick up 'Down These Mean Streets' to get a cheap thrill. All they have to do is go to the movie theaters and pornography shops on 42d Street or even to their neighborhood candy stores."

Mr. Regan, who voted in favor of the ban, says: "If parents want to buy the book for their children, it is their privilege. But I can't be convinced that a 12-year-old can find it of social significance. Why is everyone so upset? Controlling what children read is entirely different from controlling what adults read."

Some District 25 parents, regardless of which board faction they favor, say they are growing increasingly annoyed that the board is spending so much of its time on "peripheral issues"—whether to ban a book, whether to resolve that the state should aid nonpublic schools—and neglecting matters of educational substance.

Some of the loudest applause at the District 25 board meeting came shortly before 1 A.M. when Bill Friedmann, a lawyer, urged conciliation upon both sides and called for "a clean start."

The U.S. Supreme Court addresses book access in famous case

The Supreme Court addressed the issue of student access to books in a public school library in Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico (1982).

In 1975, the school board in the Long Island, New York, community of Island Trees issued an “unofficial direction” that 10 books should be removed entirely from the libraries of a local public high school and junior high school; the school board pushed to remove an 11th book from a 12th grade literature course curriculum.

The board described the books as “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Sem[i]tic, and just plain filthy.”

The 11 books were:

1. “Slaughterhouse-Five” by Kurt Vonnegut
2. “The Naked Ape” by Desmond Morris
3. “Down These Mean Streets” by Piri Thomas
4. “The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers” edited by Langston Hughes
5. “Go Ask Alice” by Anonymous
6. “Laughing Boy” by Oliver La Farge
7. “Black Boy” by Richard Wright
8. “A Hero Ain’t Nothing but a Sandwich” by Alice Childress
9. “Soul on Ice” by Eldridge Cleaver
10. “A Reader for Writers” edited by Jerome Archer (which was in the middle school library only)
11. “The Fixer” by Bernard Malamud (which was in the curriculum of a 12th grade literature course)

The school board appointed a book-review committee, which:

- Recommended that two of the books (“The Naked Ape” and “Down These Mean Streets”) be removed.



Question

Did the Board of Education's decision to ban certain books from its junior high and high school libraries, based on their content, violate the First Amendment's freedom of speech protections?

Conclusion

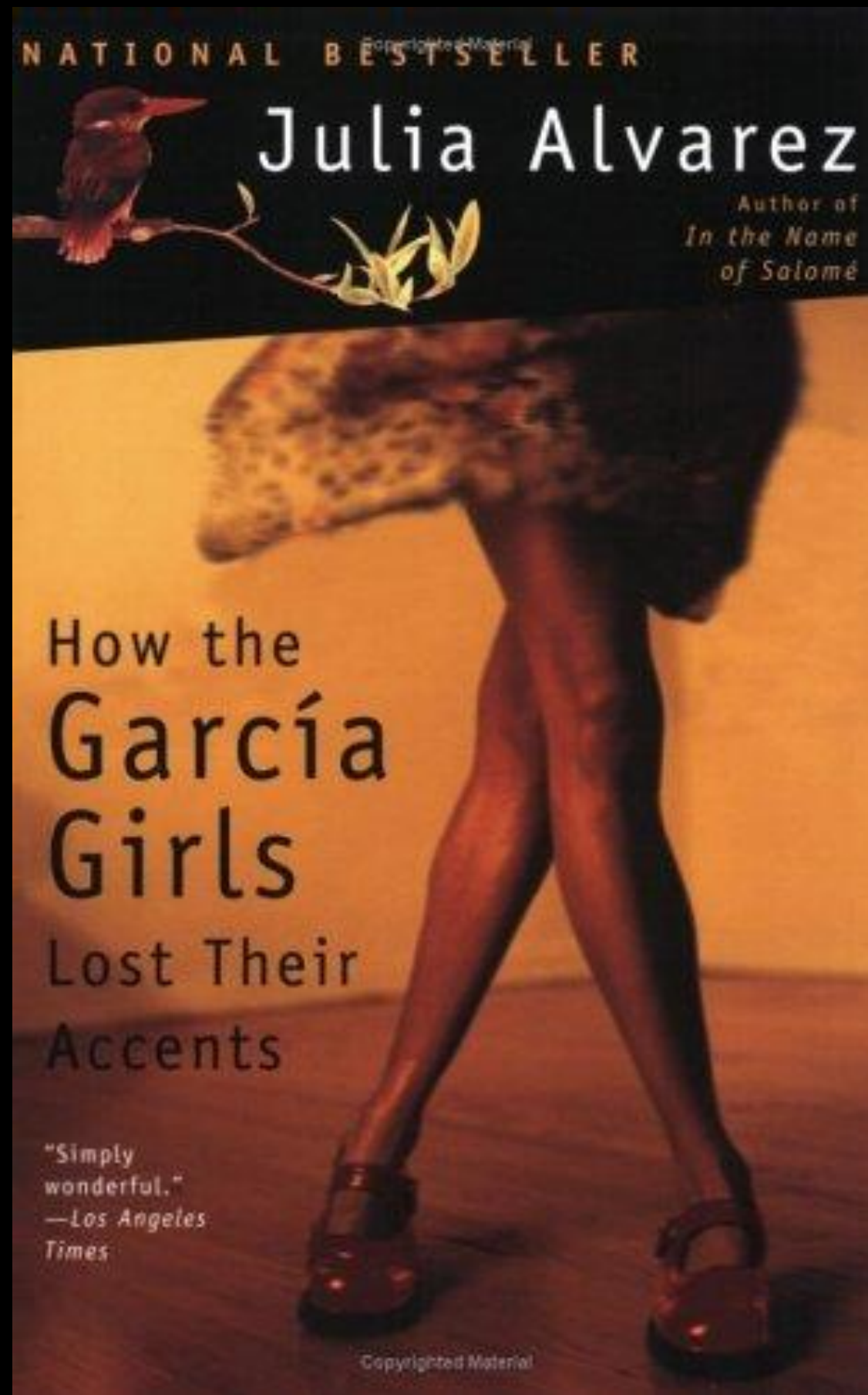
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5-4 DECISION

PLURALITY OPINION BY WILLIAM J. BRENNAN, JR.



Yes. Although school boards have a vested interest in promoting respect for social, moral, and political community values, their discretionary power is secondary to the transcendent imperatives of the First Amendment. The Court, in a 5-to-4 decision, held that as centers for voluntary inquiry and the dissemination of information and ideas, school libraries enjoy a special affinity with the rights of free speech and press. Therefore, the Board could not restrict the availability of books in its libraries simply because its members disagreed with their idea content.



How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents

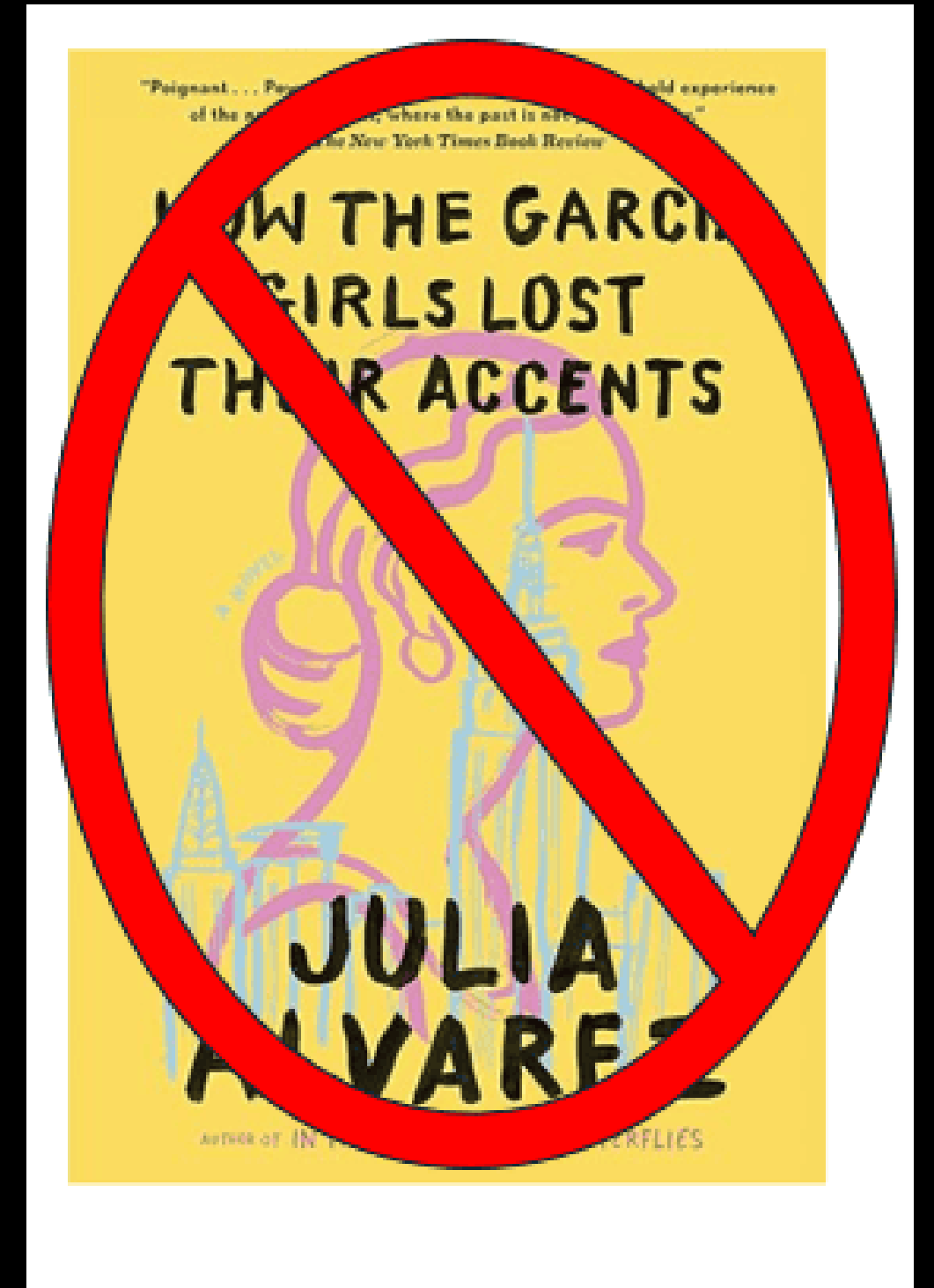
By Julia Alvarez

How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, written by Julia Alvarez, is a coming of age novel told in reverse that describes the stories of four sisters and their experience of adulthood in the U.S and their childhood in the Dominican Republic.

The book explores themes of immigration, culture, sexuality, family conflict, and many more. It focuses on each of the struggles the four sisters faced with having to leave their homeland behind for the safety of their family. A very real and true reality that many immigrants face today.

Why was the book banned?

- According to a published article on banned books in 2008 by Marshall University, the reason the book was banned because parents conflict with the books “profanity and descriptions of drug abuse, sexually explicit conduct and torture.”
- Julia Alvarez response to her book being banned in a MSNBC interview with Ali Velshi was “people are afraid of anything that’s going to be disturbing or other than what they want in their bubble.”
- Many of the themes and issues explored in the book reflect real-world challenges that we see today, particularly those related to ICE and the struggles of forming an identity as an immigrant in America

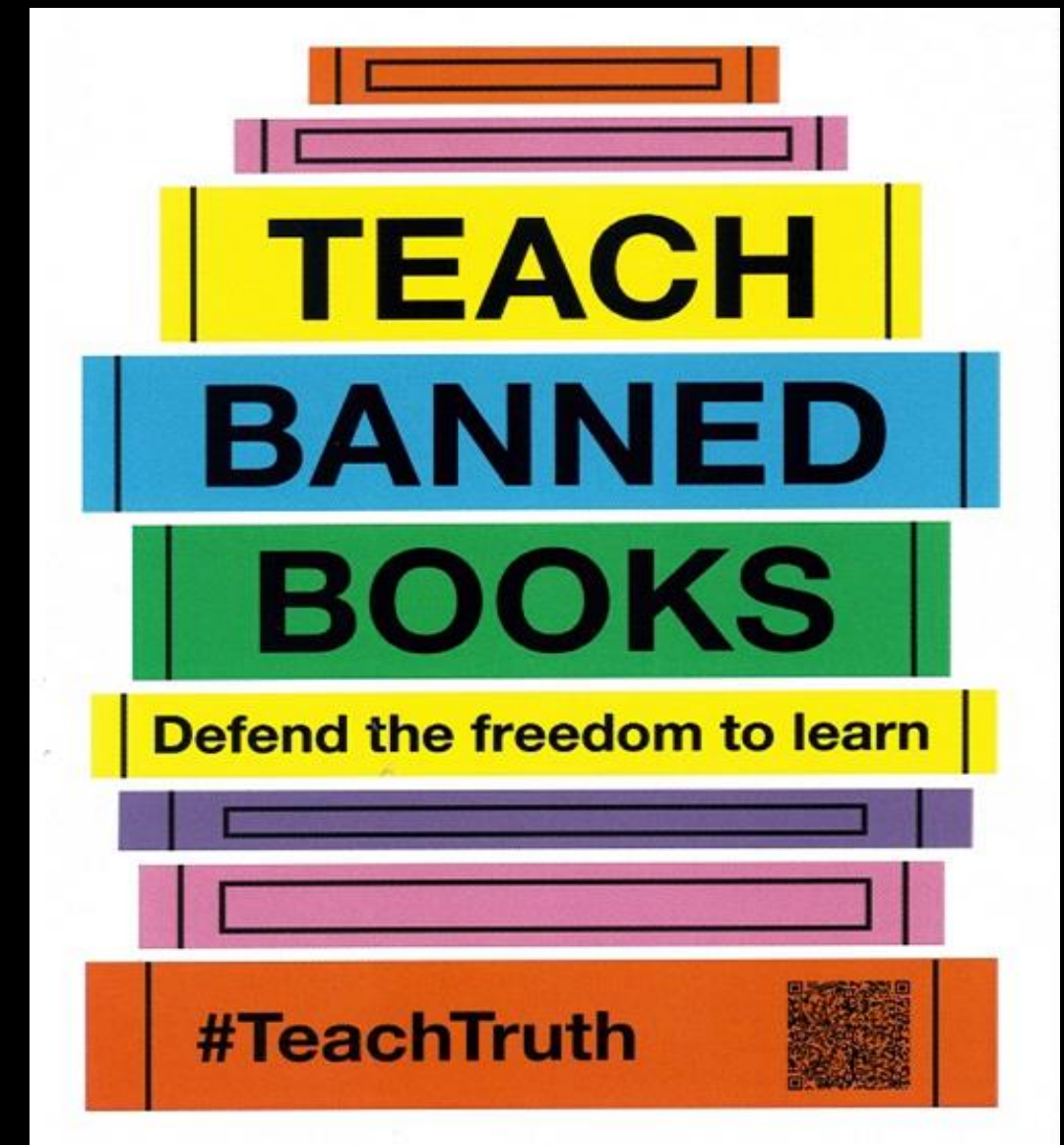


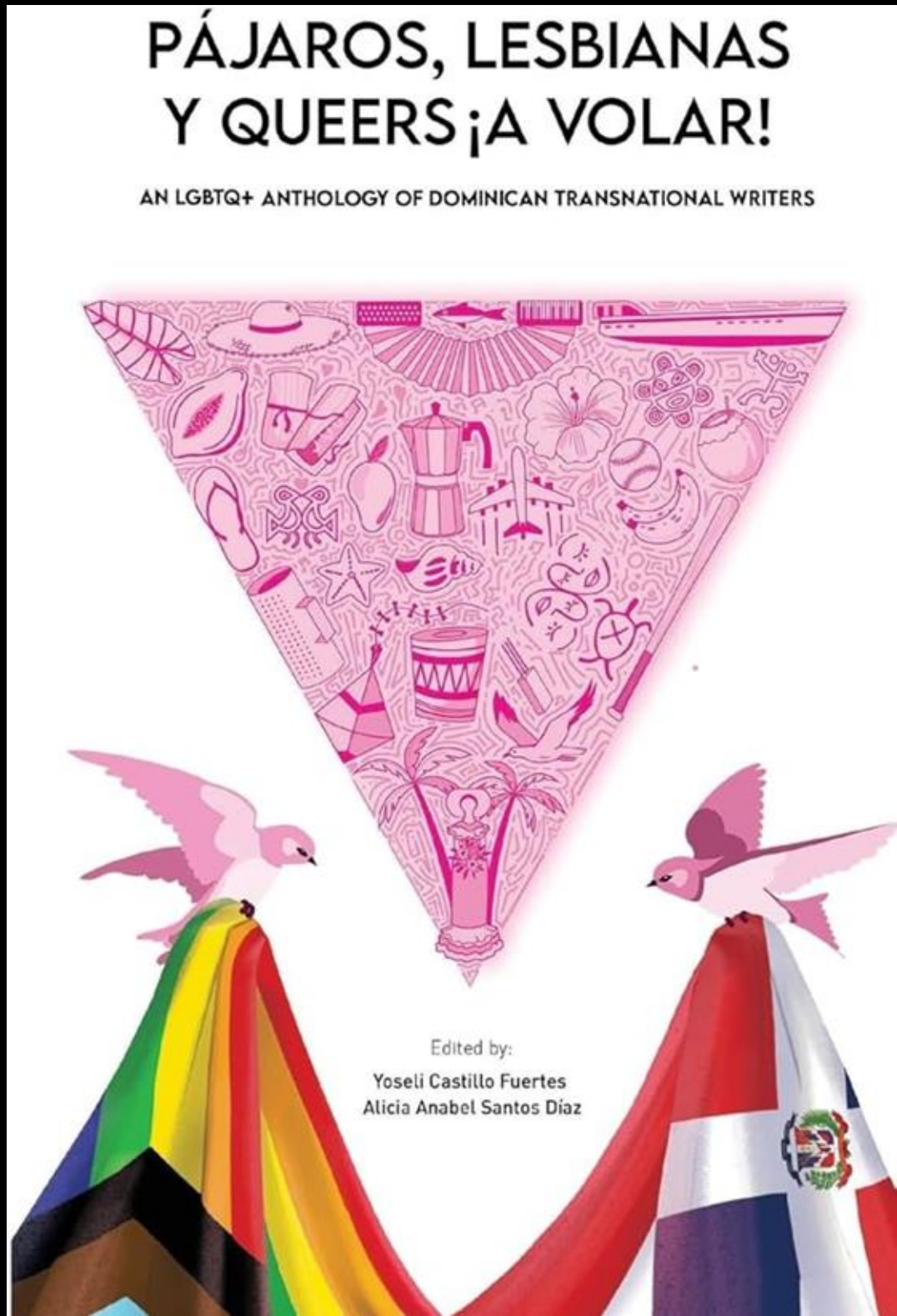
How do these book bannings affect us?

Why does this matter?

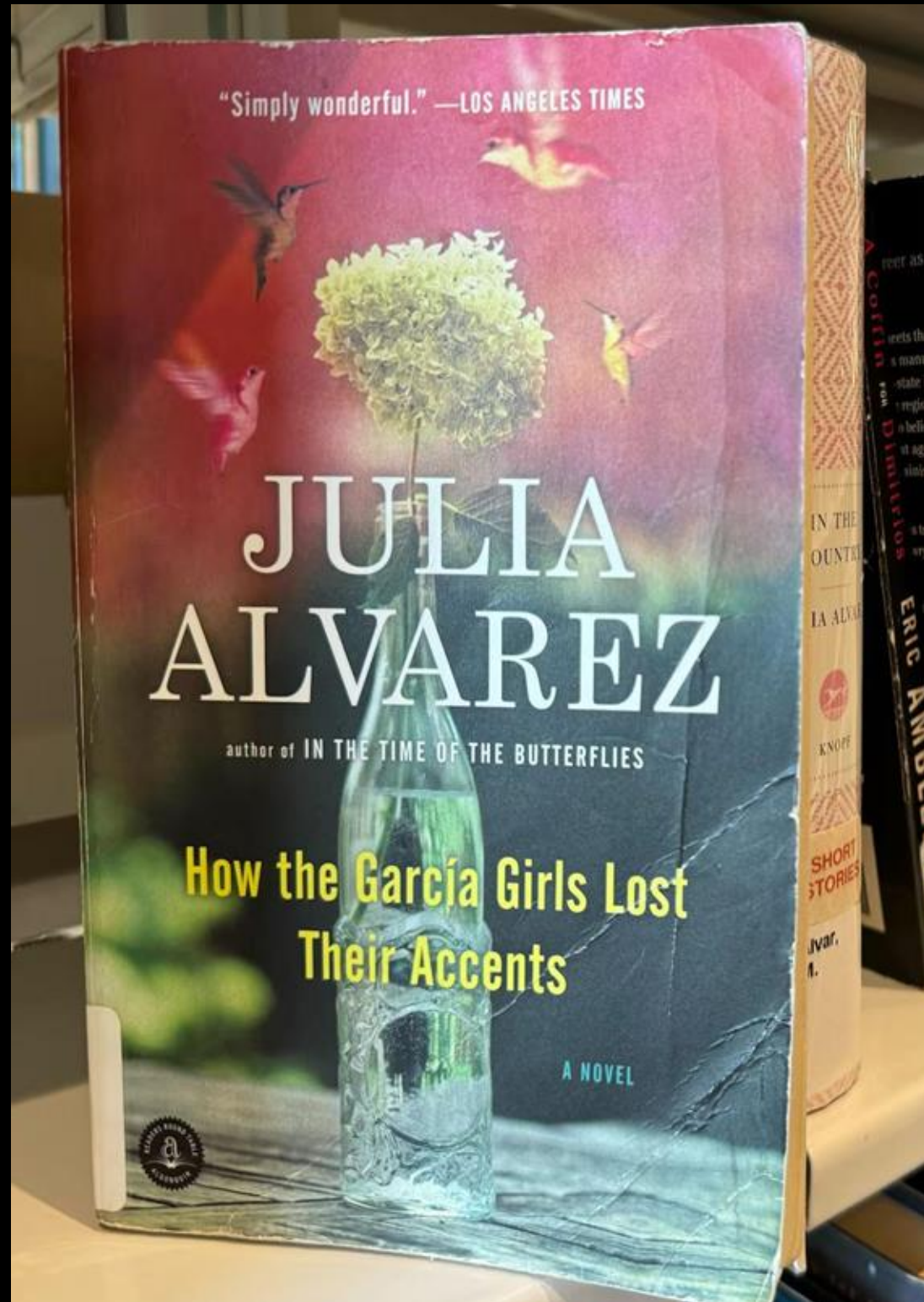
- Novels give us perspective and allow students as myself to develop critical thinking skills about real-world issues
- Many of the themes portrayed in Julia's novel are not often talked about such as :
Machismo, immigrant identity, racism in school, money, sexuality, and many more
- Banning these books will not only affect our youth but continue to silence the voices of minorities who write about their and others experiences

“And this is why books are so important to us — and especially to our young people who are doing that in a way consciously for the first time as adolescents. Finding themselves. Trying to figure out who they are.” — Julia Alvarez





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PÁJAROS, LESBIANAS Y QUEERS ¡A VOLAR! shows that Dominican queer identities, like flowers, may be uprooted, rejected, or ignored but they can still survive, bloom and demand space to exist fully.

HOW THE GARCIA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS

The García Girls were like flowers planted in the Dominican Republic, then uprooted and arranged in the U.S. Their roots, language, family and culture were removed and slowly they began to lose pieces of themselves.

The water holds memory according to our ancestors,
who were dragged across the sea therefore, even when our memories
fail our soul will never forget who we are.

Cordelia McDonald

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