Bodega Dreams

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNESTO QUIÑONES

Ernesto Quiñonez was born in Ecuador. His parents immigrated to the United States when he was 18 months old, and he was raised in Spanish Harlem. Quiñonez's mother was a Jehovah's Witness, while his father was a devout communist. Quiñonez published his first novel, *Bodega Dreams*, in 2000. Critics hailed it an instant classic for its vivid description of Spanish Harlem's turbulent street life and its exploration of oppressions faced by Latinx immigrants. Quiñonez's subsequent novels *Chango's Fire* (2004) and *Taina* (2019) were also met with substantive critical acclaim for their intimate depictions of immigrant life and Quiñonez's biting critiques of urban politics, especially the racial dynamics of gentrification. Quiñonez has said that his writing is motivated by his own experiences growing up as an immigrant in a marginalized neighborhood, and by his desire to be a role model for aspiring Latinx writers. Quiñonez is also a renowned public essayist and is currently a professor at Cornell University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Quiñonez draws directly on the history of Spanish Harlem in *Bodega Dreams*, referencing several waves of immigrants who occupied the neighborhood over the course of New York City's history. Quiñonez alludes to early Europeans who stole land from Indigenous communities and bought Manhattan for a pittance; he also touches on former immigrant communities who occupied Spanish Harlem in the 20th century, including Irish and Italian immigrants. Quiñonez focuses primarily on the "great migration" of Puerto Ricans to New York in the 1950s and the social activism of the following generation. This included the Young Lords—a civil rights organization aimed at Latinx empowerment—who were involved in the 1969 East Harlem garbage riots, which protested against poor sanitation conditions in Harlem. In *Bodega Dreams*, both Bodega and Edwin were Young Lord activists in their youth. Quiñonez also mentions immigrant-driven artistic movements of the time, including the Nuyorican poetry movement of the 1960s, which focused on giving voice to writers who were both Puerto Rican immigrants and New Yorkers.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Related Literary Works: Like *Bodega Dreams*, Quiñonez's subsequent novels *Chango's Fire* (2004) and *Taina* (2019) also offer penetrating insights into the urban immigrant experience while tackling social and political topics like systemic oppression, gentrification, and social inequality. Quiñonez was inspired by Latinx immigrant writers who came before him, especially those associated with the Nuyorican movement (immigrant writers of Puerto Rican origin exploring their identity as New Yorkers) and their predecessors. These include Piri Thomas, who published his best-selling memoir *Down These Mean Streets* in 1967; Pedro Pietri, who wrote the epic poem "Puerto Rican Obituary" in 1973; and lyric poet Julia de Burgos, who published *Songs of the Simple Truth* in 1939. In *Bodega Dreams*, Quiñonez also pays homage to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by reframing its plot, characters, and setting to tell a story about Latinx immigrants. Other contemporary Latinx writers who capture immigrant experiences and focus on social and political issues faced by Latinx people in the United States include Raquel Cepeda's *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina* (2013); Reyna Grand's memoir *The Distance Between Us* (2013); Rigoberto González's memoir *Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa* (2011); and Marie Arana's *American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood* (2002).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Bodega Dreams
- **Where Written:** Seattle, Washington
- **When Published:** 2000
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Spanish Harlem in the late 20th century
- **Climax:** Julio has a dream in which Bodega's spirit leads him to the window to reveal a thriving, empowered community of Latinx immigrants in Spanish Harlem.
- **Antagonist:** Nazario, Vera, Mr. Blessington
- **Point of View:** First

EXTRA CREDIT

Childhood Friends. Quiñonez pays tribute to Latinx children who didn't survive their childhoods in Spanish Harlem through the character of Sapo. This character is based on Quiñonez's childhood friend who died at the age of 14.

The Great Bodega. In *Bodega Dreams*, Quiñonez adapts F. Scott Fitzgerald's plot for *The Great Gatsby* to the setting of Spanish Harlem Latinx community, with his idealistic antihero Bodega replacing the role of Gatsby. Quiñonez also names one chapter "A Diamond as Big as the Palladium," which is a riff on F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story title "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz."

PLOT SUMMARY

Julio Mercado, the narrator, begins by describing his happy-go-lucky, trouble-loving, streetwise best friend Sapo. The two of them grew up in Spanish Harlem (also known as "El Barrio"), the crime-ridden neighborhood in New York City. Julio's high school was an oppressive place full of white teachers who demoralized Latinx students, and immigrant teachers who tried to help the students but had little power. By eighth grade, Sapo had dropped out of school, and Julio was attending a more competitive school downtown.

In the present day, Julio is a college student and married to his childhood crush, Blanca. Julio reflects on the time he met a man named Willie Bodega through Sapo. Julio admits that he was drawn to Bodega's idealism and dreams of empowering the Latinx community in Spanish Harlem. Blanca, who's pregnant, is distrustful of Sapo and Bodega, and she fights with Julio whenever he goes off with Sapo to meet Bodega. Sapo often has Julio hold onto packages for him, which presumably contain **drugs**.

On the evening when Julio and Bodega first meet, Bodega explains that he has big dreams for the neighborhood: he wants to buy all the property in Spanish Harlem to secure affordable housing for the Latinx community. All he asks for in return is people's loyalty. Years ago, Bodega used to be a Young Lord activist, but his efforts to empower the community legally were thwarted by City Hall. Bodega then began smuggling guns and resources, funding his endeavors by moving heroin. Now, he's paired up with a lawyer named Edwin Nazario to fund his activist dreams through illegal means. Bodega wants Julio to connect him with Blanca's aunt Vera, who lives in Miami with her wealthy Cuban husband. Bodega has been infatuated with Vera since he was a teenager, and he wants her back. In exchange, Bodega offers Julio a nice apartment in one of his buildings for cheap rent. Although Julio is tempted by the offer, he fears Blanca's wrath and refuses. But later that evening, as Blanca and Julio discuss baby names, Julio has a change of heart. He wants to provide a nice home for Blanca and the baby, so he agrees to help connect Bodega with Vera.

That evening, Blanca finds a rental contract for their new apartment, which Bodega slipped under their door. Blanca is angry that Julio didn't discuss moving with her, but she's also distracted: she's seeking a husband for her friend Claudia, who desperately needs a green card. The next day, Julio goes with Sapo to meet Nazario and Bodega, and they overhear Nazario and Bodega talking about somebody named Alberto Salazar. When Bodega and Julio talks, Bodega is adamant that he'll marry Vera after he reconnects with her. He explains to Julio that they were in love when Bodega was a young, idealistic activist, but Vera's mother forced her to marry a rich man instead. The next day, Julio and Blanca move into their new apartment. As they move in, a news report on the television announces that an undercover journalist named Alberto Salazar has been killed in Spanish Harlem. Julio freezes when he learns that Salazar's body was recovered with a bite mark on one shoulder.

Julio reflects on his schooldays with Sapo—who bites people when he fights them. Julio recalls a day when a teacher named Mr. Blessington said racist things about Latinx culture, eventually provoking an altercation with Sapo. In the tussle, Sapo bit Mr. Blessington's shoulder and ripped off a chunk of his flesh. A Latinx teacher named Mr. Tapia ran in and urged Sapo to pretend he'd heard voices when the police came, because nobody would believe that Mr. Blessington provoked Sapo. Sapo spent the rest of the year in counseling (instead of in juvenile hall) and eventually dropped out of school.

Back in the present day, after hearing about the bite mark on Salazar's body, Blanca worries that Sapo might have killed Salazar—but Julio deflects her suspicions. The next day, Nazario meets Julio and reassures him that Sapo is safe in hiding and that he won't get in trouble with the law. The whole neighborhood treats Nazario warmly—they know that he associates with Bodega, who's positive actions have permeated the neighborhood. Nazario takes Julio to meet a salsa museum owner, and Julio learns that Bodega paid for the museum owner's daughter's medical school fees. Nazario explains that he wants to build a thriving, educated, middle-class "army" to pull New York's Latinx community out of poverty. When they return to Julio's, a nervous Bodega is waiting for them. They head to Vera's high school reunion; Bodega wants Julio to tell Vera that he's waiting in a very expensive car outside. When Julio meets Vera, he reflects that Vera looks more like a wealthy white woman than a Latinx immigrant. Julio tells Vera that he's married to Blanca and that "William Irazarry" (Bodega) is waiting outside for her. Then, Julio, Vera, and Bodega all drive off in Bodega's car together to see Bodega's buildings, and Vera is pleasantly surprised that Bodega is doing so well for himself.

Later that evening, Bodega and Vera turn up at Julio's apartment drunk, giddy, and talking about their youthful love affair. Bodega takes Vera's engagement ring off and gives it to Julio, saying he'll buy an even bigger one for Vera himself. When Blanca returns home, she's upset about the ring: she thinks it's immoral to keep it. Julio and Blanca get into a huge argument about Blanca's Pentecostal religious views, which Julio believes have brainwashed her with nonsense. Later than evening, feeling sheepish, Julio surprises Blanca at her church, and she's touched that he came. A teenager named Roberto Vega is being anointed. Julio tries not to laugh as Roberto gives an animated sermon in which he repeatedly calls the women in the congregation "whore" and "prostitute" while they swoon over him like he's "the Lord's stud." Julio feels angry that people's faith makes them believe it's alright to sit in squalor now because they'll all have luxury in heaven.

As Julio and Blanca walk home, they realize their building is on

fire—and Nazario is there. Julio realizes that a mobster named Aaron Fischman must have set fire to the building as retaliation for his associate Salazar's murder. After the fire is put out, Blanca's church community chip in to help Julio and Blanca pack up the remnants of their things and move to their new place, which Bodega sorts out for them immediately. Blanca accepts the offer despite her worries about Julio's growing involvement in shady business. The next day, Nazario takes Julio to meet a mafia boss named Mr. Cavalleri, who gives them permission to retaliate against Aaron Fischman. Bodega is notably absent, no doubt distracted with Vera. On the way back, Nazario explains that the United States acquired its wealth by cheating, stealing from, and murdering Indigenous people. Nazario reasons that Latinx people don't have the privilege of hiding their crimes behind dubious legislation, so they have to resort to crime—but in the end, it's all the same. Julio thinks about the poverty in Spanish Harlem, where disenfranchised immigrants live down the street from the world's richest people, and he starts to believe in Bodega's cause.

When Julio arrives home, Roberto Vega and Blanca's friend Claudia are there. Everyone's in a hubbub because Roberto (who's 17) and Claudia (who's 29) want to elope. They all convince Roberto to talk to his mother before leaving town. Later, that evening, Bodega tells Julio that he's confronting Vera's husband, John Vidal, tomorrow. Julio wonders why Vera is encouraging Bodega to face off with Vidal.

The next day, Julio arrives home to find Blanca and Pastor Velasquez sitting on the couch—Blanca wants Pastor Velasquez to talk Julio out of his criminal ways. Just then, the doorbell rings: two detectives named Ortiz and DeJesus want to question Julio about Sapo's involvement with Salazar's murder. Julio denies knowing anything in order to protect Sapo, which upsets Blanca. At the police station, the lead investigator, Captain Leary, arrives to interview Julio. He looks bored and lets Julio go home without really questioning him. When Julio returns home, Blanca has gone to stay to her mother's place. Julio's terrified that she won't return and he calls her, telling her that he misses her desperately.

The next day, Julio feels lost and sad. He bumps into Sapo and reluctantly agrees to go along to the restaurant where Bodega will confront Vidal. Bodega and Vera walk in, and Bodega makes a big show of making Vera tell Vidal that she's leaving him. Vidal insults Vera, and Bodega lunges for Vidal. Suddenly, a gunshot goes off. Vera has killed Vidal, and she's hysterical. Thinking quickly, Bodega calls Nazario. Bodega tells Julio that he's going to take the blame for the murder, which makes Julio thinks that Bodega is lost. As Bodega leaves, he turns back and calls Julio his brother.

The next day, Bodega is shot dead in the street. Julio is heartbroken. Nazario tells the police that Bodega shot Salazar and Vidal in order to protect the others involved in those murders. Later, Blanca returns home—she's worried about Julio's grief over Bodega, and they patch things up. Just then, Blanca's sister Negra bangs on the door: she has some gossip for Julio. It turns out that Vera wasn't in love with Bodega—she was in love with Nazario all along. Suddenly, Julio realizes that Nazario and Vera orchestrated this whole plan to get rid of Bodega and take over his fortune. As much as it pains Julio to do so—because he really doesn't trust the police—he calls Ortiz and DeJesus to tell them that Nazario was behind everything.

Bodega's wake lasts for three days. The whole neighborhood comes out, and they all talk about the ways in which Bodega helped them, bonding over their shared experiences with Bodega. Sapo tells Julio that he's going to disappear for a while and hugs Julio. He tells Julio that they're like brothers, as always. Julio thinks that Sapo might wind up being the one who takes over Bodega's fortune, and the thought makes him chuckle.

At Bodega's burial, Julio goes up to Nazario and says that he knows about everything. Nazario looks like he wants to kill Julio. Suddenly, Ortiz and DeJesus grab Nazario from behind and arrest him. As Nazario is being hauled away, he yells out to Julio, asking for Sapo to get in touch if he wants help when he takes over. As Julio is walking home, he bumps into an old man and his grandson. They've just arrived in New York from Puerto Rico, and they're looking for Bodega. Julio says that there's no Bodega, but he'll help them instead, and he offers to host them until they find their feet.

That night, Julio has a dream: in his dream, Bodega knocks on the door and leads Julio to the window. Outside, Spanish Harlem is thriving. The streets are full of murals depicting Bodega's image. People are optimistic and happy, and they believe—perhaps for the first time ever—that change is possible. Julio realizes that Bodega may have died, but his dream lives on.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Julio Mercado – Julio is the story's narrator and protagonist. The world of Spanish Harlem, in which the book is set, unfolds through Julio's eyes. When Julio is young, his white teachers at school discriminate against him because they believe that Latinx children won't amount to anything. Julio earns the nickname "Chino" as a mark of respect for fighting well in the violent neighborhood in which he grows up. In eighth grade, Julio is accepted to a more competitive school, which sets his life on track for college, unlike most of his friends who drop out of school and get involved with petty street crime to get by. Julio marries his childhood crush, Blanca, and they clash often over Blanca's religious devotion. Julio believes that the Bible is sexist and disempowering for Latinx people, and he finds it

difficult to accept Blanca's faith. Julio and Blanca also clash over Julio's unwavering loyalty to his lifelong best friend, Sapo, who's a **drug** dealer. Through Sapo, and against his own better judgment, Julio gets roped into Spanish Harlem's criminal underworld—notably with two ex-activists named Bodega and Nazario who are trying to improve living conditions for Spanish Harlem's disenfranchised Latinx residents. Julio admires how much Bodega wants to empower the Latinx community, but he wrestles with Bodega's tendency to fund his exploits through crime. As the story progresses, Julio gradually accepts that Bodega is justified in turning to crime to fund his efforts because he has few other options, and his cause is noble. By the end of the story, Bodega's ideals—of building a thriving, successful, empowered Latinx community—live on through Julio, who's deeply moved by Bodega's dreams for Spanish Harlem.

Willie Bodega – Willie Bodega, after whom the book is named, is the story's antihero. In his youth, Bodega was an idealistic Young Lord activist who had grand plans for improving Spanish Harlem, a deeply impoverished neighborhood. He spent months unsuccessfully trying to file paperwork with City Hall to secure resources for the neighborhood. Now, he uses **drug**-dealing and other criminal activity to fund his activism. He pairs up with a savvy lawyer named Nazario, and together, they surreptitiously start buying up property in Spanish Harlem to secure affordable housing for the neighborhood's Latinx residents. Bodega also helps many disenfranchised residents with rent, education costs, and employment. Bodega famously asks for nothing but people's loyalty in return, because he believes that fostering loyalty among the community will help to build the solidarity that's essential to achieve social empowerment. Julio and Sapo get involved with Bodega's shady dealings early on in the story. Bodega, however, is blinded by his unrequited love for Blanca's cousin Vera, who married a wealthy Cuban named John Vidal in her youth. Bodega's attempts to get Vera back ultimately unravel his idealistic plans for the neighborhood. At the end of the story, Nazario—the man whom Vera *really* loves—betrays and kills Bodega. Despite his tragic demise, Bodega's ideals and efforts to empower Spanish Harlem's residents spread through the community. His dreams live on through the characters he helps out, most notably through Julio.

Sapo – Sapo is Julio's childhood best friend. Sapo is scrappy, happy-go-lucky, and fearless: he famously bites people while fighting them. Sapo has a lot of street credibility, and he protects Julio while they're growing up in Spanish Harlem. Consequently, Julio is fiercely loyal to Sapo when they're adults, no matter what sort of trouble Sapo gets himself into. Sapo often leans on Julio to help him out with favors like storing and delivering mysterious packages for him. This irks Julio's wife, Blanca, who thinks that Sapo is bad news; this causes significant marital strife between Julio and Blanca. As a child, Sapo is disillusioned by teachers who assume he's just going to end up delinquent. Sapo drops out of school in eighth grade after an altercation with a racist teacher named Mr. Blessington, preferring to take his chances in the petty crime circles of Spanish Harlem's streets. Sapo starts dealing **drugs** and gets pulled into the criminal world of Bodega and Nazario, two ex-activists who are trying to change the neighborhood for the better, albeit by dubious means. For most of the story, Sapo is implicated in the murder of a journalist named Salazar who threatens Bodega and Nazario's plans. In the end, Sapo gets out of the scrape unscathed, as usual. As the story draws to a close, it's implied that Sapo may soon take control of the neighborhood's criminal underworld in the wake of Bodega's death.

Edwin Nazario – Edwin Nazario is a savvy, streetwise, and cunning lawyer who pairs up with Bodega to realize Bodega's dreams for the Spanish Harlem. Nazario is highly adept at swindling people and often uses his skills to slyly protect criminals from prosecution. Nazario is highly respected in the Latinx community and a popular figure about town. He used to be a Young Lord activist in his youth. Nazario believes that New York's powerful elite gained their wealth by stealing land from Latinx people and wiping out Indigenous people when the United States was a bourgeoning nation. Because of this, Nazario has no qualms about using whatever means he can—criminal or otherwise—to achieve his own aims. At the story's climax, Julio realizes that Nazario has been the antagonist all along. Nazario is behind the story's murders, and he's secretly in love with Vera, a woman whom Bodega is infatuated with. Together, Nazario and Vera plot to take over Bodega's fortune, and Nazario ultimately betrays and kills Bodega. Even as Nazario's being hauled to prison by the police, he's already scheming about joining forces with Sapo (who's likely going to be the next criminal boss of Spanish Harlem).

Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia – Blanca is a young Latinx woman who's married to Julio. She's beautiful and intelligent, and she's pregnant with the couple's first child. Blanca is a devout Christian, and her religious beliefs cause a rift between her and Julio, who thinks that the Bible is sexist and regressive. Julio also thinks that Blanca's religious beliefs prevent him from being honest with her about his interactions with criminals like Bodega, which causes significant strife in their marriage. Blanca vehemently opposes any illegal activity—she wants to finish college and settle down with Julio in a nice house, rather than get pulled into Spanish Harlem's underground street world. Blanca particularly despises Julio's best friend Sapo, who's a **drug** dealer, and she's perpetually frustrated that Julio usually sides with Sapo over her. Blanca leaves Julio toward the end of the story because she thinks that Julio is getting morally corrupted by Sapo and Bodega—but she returns to him in the end because they are deeply in love. Overall, Quiñonez primarily uses Blanca's character to show how religion can be

both helpful and harmful. Members of Blanca's church loyally support one another, but the judgment Blanca and others experience within the church also exposes how religion can be misogynistic and disempowering.

Veronica "Vera" Vidal – Vera is Blanca's aunt. She left Spanish Harlem many years ago to move to Miami with her rich Cuban husband, John Vidal. Like John Vidal, Vera tries to mask her Latinx heritage by changing her name from "Veronica" to "Vera," dyeing her hair blonde, and pretending that she comes from money. The plot revolves around Bodega's infatuation with Vera since their youth. Bodega attempts to lure Vera back to Spanish Harlem for himself, but he doesn't realize that Vera is secretly in love with Nazario. Vera plots to (and succeeds in) killing both her husband and Bodega so that she and Nazario can be together and surreptitiously take over Bodega's property fortune.

Deborah "Negra" Saldivia – Negra is Blanca's more devious sister. While Blanca is religious and adamantly opposed to using **drugs** and breaking the law, Negra has been sneaking out to party since she was a teenager. She has her finger on the pulse of Spanish Harlem's street gossip (both legal and illegal) and divulges many important plot points to the story's main characters. Negra has a passionate but violent relationship with her husband, Victor.

Alberto Salazar – Alberto Salazar is an undercover journalist who is killed early in the story, before he can expose Bodega's criminal activities. Much of the book's plot revolves around the aftermath of Salazar's murder. Julio thinks that Sapo killed Salazar because Salazar's body is found with a large bite mark, and Sapo is known to bite people when he fights. Quiñonez uses Salazar's bite mark to pivot into Julio and Sapo's childhoods—where he exposes the oppression that they experienced in school at the hands of white teachers like Mr. Blessington. Ultimately, it turns out that Sapo isn't the murderer. After Bodega dies, Nazario convinces the police that Bodega killed Salazar in order to protect the other people involved.

Aaron Fischman – Aaron Fischman is a mobster who controls property in New York's Lower East Side. He's also known as "The Fish of Loisada." Most of the book's characters think that Aaron Fischman is responsible for setting one of Bodega's buildings on fire. It turns out that Nazario makes up this story to hide his own devious actions.

John Vidal (Vera's husband) – John Vidal is a rich Cuban immigrant who lives in Miami. He's married to Vera, although Vera's mother pushed her into the marriage because John Vidal is wealthy, despite the fact that Vera has been in love with another man—Nazario—for most of her life. Vera shoots and kills Vidal as the story approaches its climax. Quiñonez uses Vidal's Americanized appearance to show that many Latinx people feel ashamed of their heritage and try to mask it by appearing whiter.

Claudia – Claudia is Blanca's friend from church. Claudia is a 29-year-old Colombian immigrant who needs to get married to secure a green card so that she can stay in the United States. Blanca and Julio both admit that the Latinx community tends to undervalue older, unmarried women because they have fewer childbearing years left. This highlights the community's tendency to enforce misogynistic values. Julio thinks that the Christian church is responsible for proliferating such attitudes about women, although he displays the same tendency in himself. Claudia surprises everyone by eloping with Robert Vega, a much younger, highly desirable young man in the church's community.

Nene – Nene is Bodega's brother. Nene seems to have some form of intellectual disability, as he struggles with adult conversation and mostly talks in song lyrics. Nene is entirely under Bodega's care, which implies that there aren't many public resources for people with disabilities in the underfunded neighborhood of Spanish Harlem.

Roberto Vega – Roberto Vega is a 17-year-old boy who's being anointed at the church Blanca attends. He gives a sermon depicting women as inherently promiscuous people who need to be saved by men. Quiñonez uses Roberto's sermon to argue that religious values promote misogyny in the Latinx community. Roberto surprises everybody by eloping with Claudia, who's much older than he is.

Mr. Blessington – Mr. Blessington is a white, prejudiced English teacher who oppresses Latinx children (including Julio, Sapo, and Blanca) by dismissing Latinx culture as inferior. He thinks that Latinx students are destined to wind up as criminals and prostitutes. He also abuses his power and gets away with being violent in class, knowing that the administration will never believe a Latinx student's word against his. Sapo drops out of middle school after getting into a physical altercation with Mr. Blessington. His descent into a life of crime after Mr. Blessington's abuse highlights the demoralizing oppression that Latinx children face in schools.

Julia de Burgos – Julio de Burgos is a Puerto Rican poet who lived and died in Spanish Harlem. Growing up, Julio, Sapo, and Blanca's school is named after Julia de Burgos. Despite this, a racist English teacher named Mr. Blessington dismisses de Burgos's poems as "obscure" and refuses to teach her poetry because he's prejudiced against Latinx people. Quiñonez uses Mr. Blessington's attitude to expose the disheartening oppression that Latinx children typically experience in school.

Geran – Geran is an old man who immigrates to New York at the end of the story. Julio, who's inspired by the late Bodega's support for the Latinx community, offers to host Geran and his grandson Hipolito until they get on their feet. Quiñonez uses Julio's act of kindness to show that although Bodega was killed, his ideals live on through people like Julio.

Fat Tony Salerno – Fat Tony Salerno is an Italian mafia boss who used to run Spanish Harlem's criminal underworld. When Fat Tony Salerno goes to prison, he sells many of his properties to Bodega, which kicks off Bodega's plan to buy all the property in Spanish Harlem to secure affordable housing for the community.

Popcorn – Popcorn is a gay man who was found stabbed to death on his rooftop several years ago. The police didn't pursue the case because the media didn't make a big deal about it. Quiñonez stresses this point to show that the city's officials don't really care about the Latinx community in Spanish Harlem.

MINOR CHARACTERS

DeJesus – Detective DeJesus is a Cuban police officer investigating Salazar's murder along with Detective Ortiz and Captain Leary. He is racist against Puerto Ricans, despite the common struggles faced by both Cuban and Puerto Rican immigrants in New York.

Ortiz – Detective Ortiz is a Puerto Rican officer investigating Salazar's murder along with Detective DeJesus and Captain Leary. Ortiz respects Julio for standing up to DeJesus's racism against Puerto Rican people.

Captain Leary – Captain Leary leads the investigation into Salazar's murder. He's not really interested in the case and just wants to tie up the loose ends quickly and easily. Quiñonez uses Captain's Leary's disinterested attitude to show that the police don't take criminal cases in Spanish Harlem very seriously.

Victor – Victor is Negra's husband. He has a passionate but rocky—and often violent—relationship with Negra.

Pastor Velasquez – Pastor Velasquez runs the Pentecostal church that Blanca attends. He often stresses that religion saved him from a life of **drugs** and petty crime. Blanca is close with Pastor Velasquez, but Julio believes that the Pastor's religious attitudes are sexist and disempowering for the Latinx community in Spanish Harlem.

Googie – Googie is Roberto Vega's older brother who struggles with a **drug** addiction. He lives in Chicago.

Blanca's mother – Blanca's mother is a Latinx immigrant who single-handedly supported her family and raised her two daughters Blanca and Negra. Blanca thinks that her mother is a good example of a strong, empowered woman—but Julio thinks that society held her back by denying her an education.

Mr. Tapia – Mr. Tapia is a Latinx immigrant teacher at Julio's school. He tries to empower the Latinx students and protect them from teachers like Mr. Blessington, but he has little power.

Hipolito – Hipolito is a young boy who immigrates to New York at the end of the story with his grandfather Geran.

Mr. Cavalleri – Mr. Cavalleri is a mafia boss who lives in Queens.

Inelda Aldino – Inelda Aldino is the woman who stabbed and killed Popcorn.

Junior Jiga – Junior Jiga is a young Latinx boy who's been given this name because he carries around a *jiga* (knife) and slashes people's faces with it when he gets into fights. Quiñonez mentions Junior Jiga to highlight the pervasive violence in Spanish Harlem, where the story is set.

Lucy – Lucy is Blanca's best friend in school.

Rita Moreno – Mr. Tapia mentions Puerto Rican Hollywood star Rita Moreno to inspire his students to believe Latinx people can achieve great things against the odds.

Reggie Jackson – Mr. Tapia cites Latinx baseball star Reggie Jackson to inspire his students to believe Latinx people can achieve great things against the odds.

Doña Ramonita – Doña Ramonita is a woman who runs a *botanica* (a store that sells religious goods). She enacts indigenous rituals for the Latinx community in Spanish Harlem.

TERMS

Nuyorican – Nuyorican is a portmanteau of "New Yorker" and "Puerto Rican" that's used to describe Puerto Rican immigrants in New York. The word was originally used as an insult until Puerto Rican residents in East Harlem reclaimed its meaning in the 1960s and 70s. Today, the word is most often heard in the context of the Nuyorican movement, an artistic and intellectual movement led by self-identified Nuyorican people. In *Bodega Dreams*, Quiñonez briefly alludes to real-life poet and playwright Pedro Pietri, who set up the "Nuyorican Poets Cafe" in Manhattan, where emerging Latinx poets (many of whom were experimenting with slam poetry in the 1970s) could perform.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LATINX IMMIGRANTS AND BROKEN DREAMS

In *Bodega Dreams*, author Ernesto Quiñonez underscores the oppression that Latinx immigrants face in the United States. The central backdrop of Quiñonez's story is a vibrant but deeply disenfranchised immigrant community in Spanish Harlem, a neighborhood in New York

City. The neighborhood is populated with the children and grandchildren of immigrants, who fled political unrest in Puerto Rico and Cuba in the 1950s, hoping for better lives in the United States. Through narrator Julio, a young college student from Spanish Harlem, Quiñonez argues that systemic barriers—in schools, media, and politics—marginalize the Latinx community, largely condemning them to lives of poverty and petty crime. The elite's oppressive practices in the United States effectively deny Latinx people empowerment and freedom—both in the slums of Spanish Harlem *and* in their homelands, which suffer under the legacy of colonial rule. Quiñonez thus uses the setting of *Bodega Dreams* to stress how strongly systemic barriers to opportunity stunt disenfranchised people's potential to realize their personal dreams.

Julio argues that white teachers in his school undermine immigrant students and make them believe they have no culture or prospects, ultimately demotivating students to stay in school. Julio reflects that "to the white teachers, we were all going to end up delinquents" which makes the students feel like getting educated is a futile effort. Julio's best friend, Sapo, embodies the disillusionment among Latinx children when he reflects that "Mr. Blessington told me I was going to end up in jail, so why waste my time doing homework?" Julio's teachers largely privilege white culture and teach the kids about places like Italy while deriding the intellectual contributions of Latinx scholars and artists, which makes the children feel "almost convinced that our race had no culture" and prompts them to believe that bettering themselves is pointless. Mr. Blessington, a racist English teacher, dismisses Puerto Rican poet Julia du Burgos's poetry as "obscure" and irrelevant, even though the school is named after du Burgos. Julio notes that the immigrant teachers work hard to empower the immigrant students, knowing that "you can't pass a test if you already feel defeated"—but they have no real power in the school system, which limits their ability to combat systemic oppression in schools. After an altercation between Sapo and Mr. Blessington, an immigrant teacher named Mr. Tapia urges Sapo to pretend he is emotionally disturbed to avoid being expelled, knowing that Mr. Blessington has too much power in the school for anyone to believe he provoked Sapo. Sapo eventually drops out of school and starts dealing **drugs**. His trajectory into adulthood reflects how the racism of teachers like Mr. Blessington leaves students disillusioned about their prospects, despite the support of well-meaning but marginalized immigrant teachers like Mr. Tapia.

Julio also argues that depictions of Latinx people in the media and news cycle sensationalize Spanish Harlem's residents as violent thugs. Julio implies that the depiction of Latino men in films like *West Side Story* reinforces the false image of Latino boys as inherently "violent, with switchblade tempers." Similarly, the media only covers events in Spanish Harlem when violence is involved, further adding to the conception of Latinx people as violent. Julio's apartment is set on fire during a turf war between mafia bosses, leaving the residents homeless—yet the media relegates this news to a "footnote" because nobody dies, meaning they can't sensationalize the violence in the neighborhood.

The story's antihero—an idealistic ex-activist named Bodega who's turned to crime to realize his goal of empowering Spanish Harlem—argues that legislators at City Hall have oppressed the neighborhood for years by denying its residents crucial funding for sanitation and social services. Bodega recalls that the city's legislators largely ignored his repeated efforts to file paperwork requesting better sanitation, education, and social programs in Spanish Harlem. Bodega explains that when the Young Lords (his former local activist group) took it upon themselves to clean up the neighborhood and protect the residents from crime, the city sent the police to arrest the group for civil disobedience, thus further disempowering the community. Quiñonez subtly implies here that life in Spanish Harlem—which is full of residents who pay taxes but receive few resources in return and lack political advocates—mirrors the social and political landscape of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican immigrants who come to the U.S. seeking opportunity, then, are seemingly no better off in places like Harlem than they would be in their home country due to the systemic oppression they face in America.

For the United States, Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territorial possession: the government treats it as part of the United States and demands taxes from the residents. Yet the government also treats Puerto Rico as a somewhat separate entity that receives fewer resources, much like the way New York city politicians treat Spanish Harlem. In obstructing efforts to improve the community, city legislators effectively turn Spanish Harlem into a burned-out, crime-ridden wasteland that's ripe for plucking disillusioned young children out of school and into a life of crime. Quiñonez thus shows that immigrants who seek a better life in the United States face substantive systemic oppression that denies them a chance to better their lives, thus reinforcing cycles of crime and poverty across generations.

CRIME, WEALTH AND ACTIVISM

Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams*, set in New York's diverse urban landscape of the late 20th century, argues that wealth and crime are inherently connected. An ex-activist named Bodega and a lawyer named Nazario utilize the criminal underworld to fund their dreams of empowering the Latinx immigrant community in Spanish Harlem. They use illicit funds—acquired from **drug** deals and dangerous mafia involvement—to buy property for the community, fund the education of promising Latinx youths, and promote upward mobility in the disenfranchised corner of Manhattan they call home. But many of the story's other

characters—especially narrator Julio's young, religious wife, Blanca—condemn illegal activity. However, to Quiñonez, Bodega and Nazario act no differently than the city's powerful white elite. Politicians effectively commit the same, albeit technically legal, crimes by "signing pieces of paper" that steal land and resources from indigenous communities to favor the upward mobility of their own people. The city's marginalized immigrants, on the other hand, are forced to turn to illegal crime to better their communities because they have no other resources available to them. Quiñonez thus implies that oppressed people with limited options might need to break the law to enact social change, but if their cause is worthy, their actions are justified.

Through the voice of savvy lawyer Nazario, Quiñonez argues that Bodega and Nazario's underground activities are no more immoral than those of the city's white political elite, who also stole to acquire their wealth. Nazario argues that America's first colonizers stole land from indigenous people and committed violent crimes to acquire their wealth. Nazario says that such colonizers took "shady steps," such as depicting their colonizing actions as "Manifest Destiny" (the idea that their westward expansion was inevitable and therefore justified) to disguise heinous crimes like the genocide of Native Americans. Similarly, Nazario argues that powerful people acquire wealth by exploiting others using sly methods—like sneaky legislation—that aren't available to disempowered communities. Nazario says, "The day will come when, just like the white guy, we will also steal by signing the right papers." Here, Nazario implies that the political elite use their power to disguise their theft as legal business activity, but their actions are no less criminal.

As the story progresses, Julio, the story's narrator, ultimately reasons that Bodega and Nazario's actions are not immoral, but justified—because their cause is noble, their options are limited, and their actions are no different than the city's elite. Julio's wife, Blanca, argues that illegal activity (like stealing) is categorically wrong because the powers that be say so, but Julio questions this perspective. He reasons that Bodega and Nazario aren't wrong, because they act no worse than the powerful people in New York, and their vision is for the good of the community. Julio notes that Bodega and Nazario are really no different than the "Anglo" (non-Hispanic white people): in buying up and renovating cheap property for the community, they steal "by signing the right papers," just like politicians who starve the Latinx community of funds through bogus legislation. Recalling that the Americas were founded by colonists striking cheap bargains, Julio argues that Bodega and Nazario are effectively just "buying the island back at the same bargain rate" from the white communities that colonized them in the first place. Julio ultimately decides that he can support Bodega and Nazario because their goal is defensible: they're fighting to free the community from oppression, stave off white gentrification, and "create new hope for the neighborhood." Quiñonez effectively argues—through Julio's gradual acceptance of Bodega and Nazario's illicit activities—that communities marginalized by the dubious political activities of wealthy people are justified in empowering themselves by any means available to them. In the end, their crimes are no different, and therefore no worse, than the thievery of their oppressors.

RELIGION, SEXISM, AND POVERTY

Leveraging the voice of young narrator Julio, author Ernesto Quiñonez offers a harsh critique of religion as a largely disempowering force in the Latinx community in *Bodega Dreams*. Julio argues that his devout wife, Blanca, chides him for his sexism yet endorses the Bible, which depicts women as mere afterthoughts to the activities of men. Julio also thinks that the sermons at Blanca's church depict women as promiscuous and sinful, and that their chief purposes in life are to procreate and to blindly adore men. Julio's other qualm with the church is that it encourages people to tolerate their poor living conditions and wait for salvation instead of taking steps to empower themselves, which only reinforces their poverty. Using Julio as a mouthpiece, Quiñonez argues that even though there's an admirable sense of community among the churchgoing residents of Spanish Harlem, many of the messages that religion peddles ultimately damage, rather than improve, the welfare of the Latinx community.

Julio argues that religion is sexist because the Bible depicts men as people who make decisions without consulting their wives, and the sermons at Blanca's church reinforce the perception of women as promiscuous sinners whose salvation depends upon men. Julio argues that the Bible is sexist because he "read that entire Bible and rarely did any of the men tell their wives what they were going to do, they just went and did it." Julio also thinks the sermons at Blanca's church disempower women by depicting them as sexually immoral people who serve little purpose beyond getting pregnant and glorifying the men who offer them salvation. Julio argues that Blanca's education is a more positive influence on her than her church, because when she graduates college while pregnant, people will applaud her efforts despite her pregnancy—yet in her church, people only praise Blanca's pregnancy, as if her education is irrelevant to her purpose in life. Quiñonez also emphasizes the sexism underpinning the sermons in Blanca's church. In one sermon, the speaker (a teenager named Roberto Vega who's getting anointed) comically describes women as wayward harlots who dabble in prostitution every time there isn't a man around to save them. Roberto's enthusiastic proclamations of "A whore! A prostitute!" are met with joyous cries of "Alleluia!" from the swooning women in the congregation who completely buy into his sexist overtones,

much to Julio's amusement. Julio also thinks it's odd that the church community discounts Blanca's religious devotion because of his own atheism, as if her moral value as a woman hinges on her husband's behavior rather than her own.

Moreover, Julio argues that the churchgoing community of Spanish Harlem tolerate their poverty because they think the Lord will provide them with riches in the afterlife, meaning they wait in squalor for salvation instead of taking steps to better their situations themselves. Julio reflects that people in the church's congregation believe religion will empower them, but all he sees are marginalized people living in slums when he reflects that "you wouldn't catch Christ, in the flesh, living in the projects." Julio argues that religious devotion is actually disempowering, because churchgoing people live in squalor among "rats and roaches" while waiting for the afterlife instead of pushing for social change. Overall, Quiñonez depicts religious devotion as both absurd and dangerous.

To Quiñonez, the church effectively legitimates and reinforces—rather than eradicates—two elements of life in the Latinx community that are fundamentally disempowering: machismo and poverty. Through Julio's reflections, Quiñonez ultimately implies that education and social activism are more productive than religious devotion for empowering Latinx people.

LOYALTY, SOLIDARITY, AND COMMUNITY

Author Ernesto Quiñonez foregrounds the importance of loyalty among the Latinx community throughout *Bodega Dreams*. A strong sense of community exists among the churchgoing characters in the story, who chip in to help one another with tasks like moving apartments. Moreover, an ex-activist named Bodega and his business partner Nazario—who both dabble in crime to protect the community from a fast-approaching wave of gentrification—emphasize that earning people's loyalty is of utmost importance to them. They take pains to support the local community in times of financial strain, asking for nothing but loyalty in return. They know that if the tides turn against them and they're targeted for their illegal activities, the community will rally around them. More importantly, Bodega wants to foster loyalty within the community to motivate people to band together and fight for social change. Even though Nazario turns out to be a fraud who murders Bodega, Bodega's message survives his death, showing that his plan doesn't completely fail. In his efforts to build a sense of loyalty within the community, Bodega leaves behind a lasting sense of solidarity—which empowers the community to keep fighting for social change after he dies. The book thus argues that such a sense of loyalty is vital to keeping a community strong and resilient amid trying circumstances.

Although Julio, the story's narrator, finds religious devotion highly problematic, he nonetheless applauds the sense of solidarity among the neighborhood's church community. Julio is skeptical of his young pregnant wife, Blanca's, devotion to her church community, but he admits that the congregation's loyalty to each other proves helpful in times of need. After a fire in Julio and Blanca's apartment building, Julio reflects that "I always knock the people in Blanca's church, but a lot of them were right there that night helping us move our things, everyone splashing around ankle-deep water." It's clear that the churchgoing community's loyalty and sense of solidarity are noteworthy to Julio despite his general hesitance to endorse them.

A strong sense of loyalty also binds Julio to his childhood best friend, Sapo: even though they've chosen very different lives and their friendship disrupts Julio's marriage (Blanca disapproves of Sapo's life of crime), their solidarity provides each man with a strong sense of empowerment that neither is willing to give up. Both Julio and Julio's father stress how important Sapo's loyalty is for Julio's welfare as he navigates growing up Spanish Harlem. Julio says his father "knew the importance of having someone to watch your back," suggesting that the loyalty between Julio and Sapo provides them with a sense of safety in the rough streets of their childhood. Quiñonez also suggests that loyalty among friends helps people develop a sense of self-worth, which he expresses through Julio's reflection that "Sapo had arrived at a time when I needed someone there, next to me, so I could feel valuable." As an adult, Julio's loyalty to Sapo is unbreakable—despite the strain it causes in his marriage—meaning that people in this community take their loyalty to each other very seriously, even if it comes at a substantive personal cost. Julio argues that maintaining loyalty to his childhood friend Sapo is essential, even after he takes on other commitments like marriage. Julio holds on to mysterious packages (presumably containing **drugs**) for Sapo, even though this triggers tension with Blanca and compromises his sexual relationship with her. Although Blanca threatens to leave Julio for not confiding in her, Julio feels compelled to hide information from Blanca when it implicates Sapo in criminal activity.

The story's antihero, Bodega, also emphasizes that above all else, he wants to earn the community's loyalty, stressing that it's a valuable commodity and essential to his overall goal of achieving social change in Spanish Harlem. When Julio meets Bodega, Bodega says that he helps people out—by helping them financially with housing, schooling, and business ventures—in order to gain their loyalty. Julio stresses that "All Bodega asked in return was their loyalty" to underscore how much Bodega's grand plan to empower the community hinges on fostering solidarity among the neighborhood's residents through their sense of loyalty to each other. After a fire breaks out in Julio's apartment building, Bodega also reflects that in Spanish Harlem's times of crisis, "the most important form of

help you got was from your neighbor, not the government," implying that a sense of solidarity is essential for the disenfranchised community's survival. Even though Bodega is murdered before he can realize his dream, Julio nonetheless frames Bodega's legacy in terms of the community solidarity he inspires, showing how valuable it remains even after Bodega's plans implode. At the end of the story, Julio has a dream in which the Latinx community honors Bodega and feels a strong sense of solidarity and empowerment in the thought that "Tomorrow Spanish Harlem would run faster, fly higher, stretch out its arms further, and one day those dreams would carry its people to new beginnings." Julio's dream emphasizes that despite Bodega's demise, his real triumph is the loyalty and solidarity he fosters in the community, which has a powerful impact on their hopes for the future. Quiñonez thus argues—through Bodega's voice—that loyalty is of central importance to disenfranchised communities like Spanish Harlem. Loyalty grows into solidarity, which provides communities with the strength and resilience needed to pursue social change and better their lives.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DRUGS

Various characters' dealings with illicit drugs symbolize the ways in which Spanish Harlem's residents are systemically oppressed and effectively forced to break the law. Julio's best friend, Sapo, drops out of middle school and starts dealing drugs after he's provoked into a fight with a racist teacher. Years later, selling drugs is seemingly Sapo's only option to earn a sufficient living. After all, Julio is a high school graduate and college student, yet he still struggles to make ends meet with his low-paying job at a grocery store. Sapo's life of crime thus represents the general lack of opportunity and economic desperation that young Latinx people face as the education system consistently overlooks or antagonizes them. Sapo even ropes Julio into his dealings, occasionally asking him to look after or deliver packages that almost certainly contain drugs. Julio's reluctant yet steadfast support of Sapo in this way reflects the unfortunate reality that people in Spanish Harlem are often forced to choose between abiding by the law or remaining loyal to one's friends.

Further, when City Halls refuses to aid antihero Willie Bodega in helping allocate more resources to the neighborhood, Bodega is forced to resort to running heroin (among other criminal endeavors) in order to fund his charitable work. Again, an otherwise staunchly moral and altruistic man resorting to drug-dealing symbolizes the ways in which the system neglects and marginalizes entire Latinx communities. Good people like Bodega are more or less forced to turn to lives of crime if they want to bring about lasting change. In this way, the drugs that circulate in Spanish Harlem aren't solely an indicator of crime and degeneracy—they're a marker of people desperately trying to better themselves and their fellow residents in the only way they can.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Bodega Dreams* published in 2000.

Book 1, Round 1 Quotes

So, since we were almost convinced that our race had no culture, no smart people, we behaved even worse. It made us fight and throw books at one another, sell loose joints on the stairways, talk back to teachers, and leave classrooms whenever we wanted to.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Sapo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator, Julio, begins *Bodega Dreams* by describing his experiences growing up in Spanish Harlem sometime in the late 20th century. It's a turbulent, dilapidated, crime-ridden neighborhood packed with Latinx immigrants. In Julio's school, most of the white teachers tend to glorify white European culture and dismiss Latinx culture.

This makes Latinx children—like Julio—believe that their own culture isn't worth learning about, which demotivates them and prompts them to start acting out. This is especially the case for Julio's best friend, Sapo, who eventually drops out of middle school and begins dealing drugs after he's provoked into a fight with a racist teacher. Quiñonez effectively argues that the dismissal of Latin culture in schools pushes students into bad behavior rather than academic success. Julio's reflections thus highlight a damaging effect of systemic oppression on Latinx immigrants: white-centric educational curricula make children of color feel irrelevant. This understandably angers and frustrates minority students, triggering them to act out in school.

Nor were they violent, with switchblade tempers.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Julio is discussing the racism he experienced during his school days in Spanish Harlem. In this quote, he references the musical *West Side Story*, which centers on an interracial love story and turf war between Italian and Puerto Rican immigrants in 1950s New York. The musical stereotypes Puerto Ricans as violent and emotionally explosive: they're always keen to flip out their switchblade knives and start a fight. Contrary to the musical's depiction of Puerto Ricans, however, Julio argues that his Latinx teachers who grew up in that generation aren't "violent"—nor do they have "switchblade tempers" (meaning they're not always looking to start a fight).

For Quiñonez, depictions of Latinx immigrants like those in *West Side Story* are oppressive because they fuel the perception that Latinx people are dangerous, unstable, and violent. Julio's experiences with his hardworking and supportive Latinx teachers (a stark contrast to his condescending or outright confrontational white teachers) shows them in a completely different light. Quiñonez thus makes the case that fictional representations of Latinx people in popular culture can promote damaging prejudices.

> My father understood where we were living. He knew, and when I would come home with bruises or a black eye he never lost his cool. I liked my father, and my father liked Sapo. He knew the importance of having someone there to watch your back. It was important to have a *pana*, a *broqui*.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Sapo

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

At the novel's opening, narrator Julio paints a picture of the neighborhood he grew up in. Spanish Harlem is a run-down, crime-ridden, and burned-out neighborhood where Latinx immigrants, junkies, and drug dealers live side by side. Here, Julio explains why it's so important to have a close friend to rely upon when living in an environment like this. Julio's best friend, Sapo, is an intimidating fighter, and he protects Julio from harm. The boys form a lifelong bond of loyalty to each other, which they acknowledge by calling each other *pana* ("friend").

Quiñonez stresses throughout the story that loyalty is incredibly valuable for disenfranchised people. Although Julio's mother is skeptical of Sapo's influence on Julio, Julio's father echoes Quiñonez's sentiment that loyalty among friends is extremely important, especially when people live in a turbulent, unsafe urban environment. Julio's father sleeps better at night knowing that Julio has a loyal friend by his side who will protect him in times of danger.

Book 1, Round 3 Quotes

> "The next day we went to City Hall and filed our demands. And you know what happened the next month, Chino? [...] The next month, they hiked the subway fare from twenty-five cents to thirty-five cents. [...] So we waited, and we waited, and we filed and we filed. Finally, when we knew our demands weren't going to be met, when we knew [...] the sanitation department wouldn't even lend us brooms to clean our streets, we had no choice but to take over the streets of East Harlem."

Related Characters: Willie Bodega (speaker), Julio Mercado

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32-33

Explanation and Analysis

After Julio describes his childhood in Spanish Harlem, the story fast-forwards to Julio's present-day life. Julio is now a college student, is married to his childhood sweetheart, and has a baby on the way. Around this time, Julio meets an activist-turned-drug-dealer named Willie Bodega, the story's antihero. At their first meeting, Bodega discusses his youth as a Young Lord activist. In this passage, Bodega explains that he tried relentlessly to use legal means to empower Spanish Harlem. He filed paperwork at City Hall, waited, refiled, and followed up, all to no avail. After Bodega's efforts were rebuffed, the Young Lords turned to more aggressive means, such as the East Harlem garbage riots of 1969, which Bodega alludes to here.

Bodega's backstory explains why he's using his criminal activities to fund his activism: all the legal means he tried were thwarted. Quiñonez effectively suggests that

sometimes, when people are disenfranchised, they need to break the law to achieve their goals. Although the narrator Julio struggles with this throughout the novel, he eventually comes around, and decides—as Bodega suggests here—that when people face systemic oppression, they might need to break the system's rules to improve their circumstances.

Book 2, Round 1 Quotes

"[…] Mr. Blessington told me I was going to end up in jail, so why waste my time doing homework?"

Related Characters: Sapo (speaker), Julio Mercado, Mr. Blessington , Mr. Tapia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

About halfway through the story, Julio recalls the day his best friend Sapo bit a chunk out of a teacher's shoulder. Julio's memories highlight the oppression faced by Latinx children in schools. Here, Sapo quips that there's no point in studying because his teachers (especially the racist Mr. Blessington) think that he's going to end up in jail anyway. Quiñonez shows how negative attitudes about Latinx immigrants by people in positions of authority (like Mr. Blessington) can trickle down and have a tangible negative impact on Latinx children's lives. If already-marginalized students don't believe they'll amount to anything, they'll never try. This turns oppressive attitudes into a self-fulfilling property: the more that teachers like Mr. Blessington tell Latinx students they have no prospects, the more demotivated the students become, and the less they succeed in school. Mr. Blessington's demoralizing racism thus has a tangible negative effect on the Latinx students' progress in academic contexts.

Julia-day-Burgos is so obscure it would be hard to find a single poem of hers. In any language.

Related Characters: Mr. Blessington (speaker), Julia de Burgos , Sapo, Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia, Julio Mercado

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Julio is remembering the day his childhood best friend, Sapo, bit a chunk of out a racist teacher's shoulder. The teacher, Mr. Blessington, often provokes the students with racist comments about Latinx people, as he does in this quote. Julio's school is named after Nuyorican (meaning New Yorker and Puerto Rican) poet Julia de Burgos. Yet Mr. Blessington refuses to teach de Burgos's poems, dismissing them as "obscure" and culturally irrelevant—even though the Nuyorican artistic movement had a significant impact on New York's culture. Additionally, in the chapter's title, Quiñonez references Piri Thomas, an acclaimed writer who was among the first to document his experiences as a Latinx immigrant in New York. This further undermines Mr. Blessington's belief that Latinx writers have nothing to offer.

Quiñonez uses Mr. Blessington's attitude to expose how the exclusion of Latinx figures from school curricula can make Latinx children feel like their culture has little value. The only role models the school portrays to them are white Americans or Europeans. Mr. Blessington, for example, tells his students that the white American poet Robert Frost is far superior to any Latinx poets. Julio, Sapo, Blanca, and the other Latinx children in the class find this extremely demoralizing.

Book 2, Round 2 Quotes

If Sapo killed that reporter then he deserved to go to jail. I thought that, but I knew I didn't mean it. I felt bad for Sapo. I also knew I would never rat out Sapo or Bodega. I wasn't going to say a word.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Willie Bodega , Sapo, Alberto Salazar

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Julio has reluctantly been drawn deeper into the shady world of Willie Bodega, and it troubles Julio when he realizes that Bodega and Sapo are embroiled in a murder. An undercover reporter named Alberto Salazar was found dead with a bite mark on his shoulder. The evidence points to Sapo, because Sapo is known to bite people when he's fighting. Despite this, Julio is adamant—as he proclaims here—that he'll never do anything to incriminate Sapo or

Bodega, even if they did actually kill someone.

Julio's loyalty to Sapo is tested throughout the story. At first, Julio holds onto the occasional mysterious package (presumably containing drugs) for Sapo, and then Sapo pushes Julio to drop a package off. Here, Sapo's shenanigans have escalated into much more serious criminal territory. Despite this, Julio never betrays Sapo, even when the situation involves something as serious as murder. Julio's commitment to the friendship effectively trumps any other concerns or moral qualms he might have, an attitude with Quiñonez implies is an integral aspect of Latinx culture.

❝ No wonder Bodega's name had spread like a good smell from a Latin woman's kitchen.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Edwin Nazario , Veronica "Vera" Vidal , Willie Bodega

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Julio is headed to Vera's high school reunion. As he's walking there with Nazario, he notices how many people stop Nazario in the street and pass on their thanks for Bodega. Quiñonez uses the metaphor of the aroma of homecooked food permeating Spanish Harlem to symbolize the positivity that Bodega sows in the neighborhood. Bodega helps Latinx immigrants when they first arrive to New York: he finds them jobs and housing, and pays their school fees. In doing so, he cultivates a bourgeoning solidarity among people who have few resources at their disposal. People react positively to having support from their community members like Bodega, and it makes their bonds as a community grow deeper, which is exactly what Bodega wants. He believes that this kind of solidarity—of being loyal to and looking out one another—is what the community needs to help it band together and push for social progress.

Book 2, Round 4 Quotes

❝ With her light skin, semiblond hair, pale seagull blue eyes, she could easily pass herself off as something other than a woman born and raised in East Harlem. She spoke as if she had spent her formative years in some boarding school, walking around with a big lettered sweater tied around her shoulders.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia, John Vidal (Vera's husband) , Veronica "Vera" Vidal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

When Julio first meets Vera, he notices how much she tries to mask her Latinx background. Both Vera and her husband John try to look as if they're not Latinx by changing their physical appearance, names (she shortens hers from Veronica to Vera, which she thinks sounds whiter), and accents. Quiñonez highlight another effect of systemic oppression here: people who live in a culture that broadly denigrates Latinx people (in media, education, and other systemic outlets) often internalize that rejection of their heritage. They feel ashamed of being Latinx, or they that assume others will respect them less for being Latinx, so they try to blend in with the dominant white culture to seem more acceptable. Here, Vera's carefully curated appearance gives off the impression that she comes from an affluent, white background. She prefers this over admitting that she grew up as a poor Latinx girl in Spanish Harlem's projects and barely finished high school.

❝ "I'll buy her one bigger than that! One with a diamond as big as the Palladium."

Related Characters: Willie Bodega (speaker), John Vidal (Vera's husband) , Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia, Julio Mercado, Veronica "Vera" Vidal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Blanca's aunt Vera has returned to New York and reconnected with Bodega. They show up drunk and giddy at Julio's door, and Vera gives Julio her engagement ring (from her husband John Vidal) because she doesn't need it any more. Bodega, as he exclaims here, is going to buy her a much bigger one. In referencing a "diamond as big as the Palladium," Quiñonez pays homage to writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote a short story called "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." Quiñonez clues the reader in here to the fact that his plot is inspired by Fitzgerald's writing.

In Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, a wealthy man named

Gatsby is blinded by his infatuation with a woman named Daisy, and his loyalty to her eventually triggers his own demise. Similarly, in *Bodega Dreams*, Bodega is so infatuated with his childhood sweetheart Vera that he doesn't realize she's tricking him to steal his fortune. Bodega's loyalty to Vera is unwavering, just as it is to everyone he cares about. Although Quiñonez stresses how valuable loyalty can be for a community's empowerment, he subtly shows here that blind or misguided loyalty can also be dangerous, much like Fitzgerald does in *The Great Gatsby*.

Book 2, Round 5 Quotes

"When you complain that you're gonna feel awkward graduating with a big belly, I know what you really mean. You mean people are gonna think, 'She may be smart, but she was stupid enough to get herself knocked up.' But when you go to church it all changes. They like you pregnant and you like them to like you pregnant."

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Blanca and Julio are having a domestic argument. Blanca's annoyed that Julio is always acting without discussing things with her first, which she finds somewhat sexist. Julio deflects by arguing Blanca's religious community is even more sexist. He thinks that Blanca's church group have regressive attitudes about the value and role of women in society. Here, Julio says that Blanca—who's the first in her family to go to college—feels embarrassed about her pregnancy in her college environment because she's learned that there are other goals in life (like education or employment) and people think it was silly for her to get pregnant so young because that might hold her back from achieving what she wants in life. Yet, when Blanca's in church, people praise her pregnancy as if she's fulfilling her central role in life, meaning they perceive little value in her beyond her childbearing ability, which Julio thinks is outdated and disempowering for women.

"Blanca, why does me becoming Pentecostal have any bearing on you getting your privileges back? On you playing the tambourine in front of the congregation? Why do they look at me and my faults and not you and your merits?"

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Willie Bodega , Sapo, Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Julio and Blanca are having an argument about Blanca's strong Christian faith. Blanca is annoyed at Julio for his tendency to exclude her when making decisions that affect them both. Julio deflects by snapping back that Blanca's congregation belittles her much more than he ever could. Here, Julio argues that the church devalues women by judging them according to what their husbands do. Blanca, who is an active member of her church community, isn't permitted to stand in front of the congregation and play the tambourine like she used to. This is because she married Julio, who's an atheist and doesn't go to church with her. Julio wonders why his own lack of faith should have any effect on Blanca's moral worthiness in the eyes of her church community. He quips here that Blanca's congregation is effectively judging her value as a person by her husband's actions rather than her own, which—as Quiñonez argues through Julio's voice—is sexist.

"And he loved her. And she, and she—don't tell me you don't know what she did. Don't tell me you don't know that she later left to fornicate with other kings. Don't tell me you don't know that she left her king and went with others, and don't tell me you don't know this princess was called Israel. And she went with other gods and slept with many idols. You still don't know what she did? […] I'll tell you what she became. You all know what she became, don't tell me you all don't know what she became. She became a harlot! […] A whore! […] A prostitute!"

Related Characters: Roberto Vega (speaker), Pastor Velasquez , Claudia , Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia, Julio Mercado

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

After fighting with Blanca about her religious devotion, Julio feels guilty, so he goes to Blanca's church service. He sits beside Blanca and her church friend Claudia just as a 17-year-old boy named Roberta Vega (who's being anointed) begins an animated sermon, part of which is captured here. Roberto Vega's vigorous speech reinforces Julio's worries about sexism in Blanca's church. Roberto effectively implies that women are morally corrupt and sexually promiscuous, and that they deviate from the correct moral path whenever there isn't a man around to save them. Julio finds it comical that the women in the congregation completely buy into this description—they even swoon at Roberto and shout fervent cries of "Alleluia!" every time he says something insulting like "whore" or "prostitute." Quiñonez implies here that the church reduces women to mere vehicles who exist to glorify men (or to make men look good in God's eyes), which is evident both in the sermon and in the way that the women idolize Roberto Vega.

> They had seen the coming of the Lord. He was coming soon, maybe even that very night. Roberto Vega had told them so. The kingdom of God would arrive, and they would all go to heaven, to the penthouse in the sky. Until then, they would go back home to the rats and roaches.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Roberto Vega , Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

A teenager named Roberto Vega, who's being anointed, is delivering a sermon at Blanca's church. As Roberto tells the congregation that the Lord is coming, Julio thinks about why he doesn't respect the church community. He's already argued that both the Bible and Blanca's church community have sexist attitudes about women. Here, Julio also reflects that sermons like Roberto Vega's encourage people to tolerate their poverty and wait for salvation, instead of fighting to make a change and improve their lives in this earthly life. As Julio puts it, people sit around in vermin-ridden homes waiting to get their "penthouse in the sky" (meaning in Heaven). Quiñonez argues here that disenfranchised people who turn to faith often believe that they'll be rewarded with riches in an afterlife. To Quiñonez, this is deeply disempowering: it teaches people to put up with poor living conditions and wait for the promise of something better after death instead of fighting for better lives while they're still alive.

> He was the Lord's stud, wanted by sisters in Christ who all hoped to be his chosen.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Claudia , Roberto Vega , Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

Julio and Blanca are at an evening church service with Blanca's friend Claudia and a teenager named Roberto Vega. Roberto has just given rousing sermon that wowed the congregation. Now, Roberto's circulating through the room as the congregation's women—especially Claudia—swoon and fawn all over him, clamoring for his attention. Julio cracks a joke to himself that Roberto is "the Lord's stud," implying—as he's suggested before—that men often treat church sermons as excuses to aggrandize themselves, and they reduce women to people who exist only for the purpose of glorifying them. As Roberto circulates the room, the women treat him like a celebrity—this boosts his ego and makes him strut around, feeling powerful. Julio thinks that church services like this are an exercise in *machismo*, or macho posturing. Quiñonez implies here that church services can be problematic when they reinforce—instead of challenge—sexist aspects of Latinx culture (like *machismo*).

> "For a Latina that's not married, twenty-seven is ancient. Nobody is going to want to marry her."

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Claudia , Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Julio and Blanca are leaving church. They start talking about Blanca's friend Claudia, who's desperately hunting for a husband so that she can get a green card and avoid

deportation. Julio surprises himself when he blurts out the comment quoted here. He's just been reflecting on the church's regressive attitudes about women are, yet he's said something sexist himself by implying that women with fewer childbearing years ahead are less desirable. This suggests that women's only value to society is their child-rearing ability. Although Julio catches himself out and feels bad for saying this about Claudia, Blanca agrees—her church community thinks the exact same thing, and they all denigrate Claudia for being unmarried at her age, which is a source of deep embarrassment for Claudia. Quiñonez uses this brief exchange to show that these regressive religious attitudes are damaging because they extend beyond the walls of the church and permeate the community at large. Even Julio, who's skeptical about the church, inadvertently reflects its attitudes about women.

Book 2, Round 6 Quotes

I always knock the people in Blanca's church, but a lot of them were right there that night helping us move our things, everyone splashing around ankle-deep in water. If we hadn't had Blanca's spiritual brothers and sisters we would have been moving things out all night.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Julio and Blanca have just arrived home from a church service to find their apartment building on fire. After the fire has been put out, they head into their charred and waterlogged apartment to salvage what's left of their things. Although Julio has spent most of the last chapter denigrating Blanca's church community for being sexist and disempowering, he admits here that they are commendable in one aspect: they feel very loyal toward one another, selflessly chipping in to help one another in times in times of need. Here, they jump in, wade through the muck, and swiftly carry Julio and Blanca's belongings out of the building, saving Julio and Blanca hours of time and energy. The solidarity that Blanca's church community displays is exactly what Bodega wants to cultivate in the community at large, because he thinks it helps people band together (as they do here) and unite in their efforts to achieve a goal (such as pulling themselves out of poverty).

All I understood was that Bodega was in trouble. Not with the fire department, which would know right away it was arson and dismiss it as another case of pyromania in a neighborhood crawling with fire-bugs. Nor with the media, who needed sensation and since no deaths had occurred would give it only passing mention, like a footnote in a thousand-page book.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia, Willie Bodega

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

An arson attack has just burned down Julio and Blanca's apartment building, which Bodega owns. After the fire's been put out, Julio reflects that neither the police nor the media will take the case seriously. He says here that the media won't report on the event because nobody was injured in the fire. This implies that news reporters sensationalize Spanish Harlem as a violent neighborhood, and without any violence involved, they're not interested in reporting on the event. The police similarly assume that Spanish Harlem is full of delinquents and criminals, so they dismiss the fire as just one of many times that violent Latinx people are acting out and setting fire to things. The media's stereotypical portrayal of Latinx people as violent is pervasive—it even triggers the police to dismiss crimes (like this one) as normal in Spanish Harlem. The media cycle thus feeds negative beliefs that authority figures in society have about Latinx people, which affects the way they treat Latinx issues on the ground, to the disadvantage of Spanish Harlem's community.

Book 2, Round 8 Quotes

"Look around, Julio. Every time someone makes a million dollars, he kills some part of the world. That part has been us for so long, and it will continue to be us unless we fight back. The day will come when, lust like the white guy, we will also steal by signing the right papers […] What do you think, it comes from nothing? America is a great nation, I have no doubts about that, but in its early days it had to take some shady steps to get there. Manifest Destiny, that was just another word for genocide."

Related Characters: Edwin Nazario (speaker), Willie Bodega , Julio Mercado

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159-60

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Bodega's apartment building is set on fire, Julio and Nazario meet a high-ranking mobster in Queens, seeking his blessing to retaliate against the fire. On the way back to Spanish Harlem, Nazario argues that his criminal activity is no worse than what New York's elite did to acquire their wealth in the past. In fact, Nazario thinks that *all* wealth is acquired by some form of stealing.

Nazario argues that the wealthy and powerful can hide their crimes behind quasi-legal legislation (or, "signing the right papers"), but disenfranchised people don't have those options available to them. Nazario implies that early American settlers disguised their heinous crimes (like genocide) with rhetoric, by claiming they weren't stealing but realizing their destiny, and through other "shady steps." Nazario implies that Americans have been committing crimes against Latinx people for centuries, and he's just playing the same game in order to reclaim what was taken from his people. This prompts Julio to wonder if Bodega and Nazario's activities aren't so much evil crimes, but rather sly activism—and Quiñonez implicitly poses the same moral conundrum to the reader.

❝ That night Sapo dropped me off at one of the new-old buildings Bodega had renovated on 116th and Lexington. Those buildings had been condemned for years. The City of New York takes so much time to either renovate or bulldoze a condemned building it's like those guys on Death Row who die of old age rather than execution. Bodega had bought the entire row from the city and had slowly renovated three of them. He had improved the block. Improved the neighborhood. Given people a place to live.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Edwin Nazario , Willie Bodega , Sapo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Since the beginning of the story, Julio has been wrestling with his conscience over Bodega and Nazario's plans to fix up Spanish Harlem using money from criminal activity. Julio generally steers clear of illegal activity to stay out of trouble. However, as the story progresses, Julio's stance on crime starts to soften. Julio sees that Bodega is improving Spanish Harlem much more quickly and efficiently than the City of New York has in the past—despite the fact that Bodega uses illegal means to do so. In seeing the tangible payoff of Bodega's efforts, Julio's attitude shifts, and he starts to embrace Bodega's vision. Julio convinces himself here that Bodega's criminal activity is justified because his cause is noble—he just wants to help the people in his community have better lives. In recognizing that the city's officials tend to ignore the needs of Latinx people, Julio decides that Bodega's actions are much-needed in this community, even if they involve crime.

Book 2, Round 9 Quotes

❝ The captain talked as if he were bored; it was all a formality, something he had done too many times and could do in his sleep.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Alberto Salazar , Sapo, DeJesus , Ortiz , Captain Leary

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

As the book approaches its climax, the police start to close in on Bodega's friends. Two detectives named Ortiz and DeJesus eagerly seek out Julio to question him about Sapo's involvement in Salazar's murder. Despite the detectives' enthusiasm, Captain Leary—who's running the investigation—doesn't seem to take Julio's interrogation all that seriously. In fact, he only asks a couple of standard questions and lets Julio go. This, of course, is good for Julio, who just wants to get himself out of this situation without implicating Sapo.

At the same time, however, Captain Leary's boredom highlights how little the police care about Spanish Harlem. Quiñonez implies that the police don't bother doing their job when Spanish Harlem is involved: their actions are halfhearted, and there's little genuine desire to get to the bottom of things and reduce crime in the neighborhood. Captain Leary's lack of concern with crime in Spanish Harlem thus reflects the broader attitudes of a society that doesn't really care about the safety of Latinx people. In general, New York seems to prefer its police to focus their energy on crimes that affect other communities.

Book 2, Round 10 Quotes

"Let's not say anything right now, okay? I'm going to be staying at Mami's for a while. At least until the baby is born. I think that's best. Best for both of us."

Related Characters: Nancy "Blanca" Saldivia (speaker), Sapo, Blanca's mother , Julio Mercado

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

After Julio is questioned by the police over Sapo's involvement in a murder, a frustrated Blanca goes to stay at her mother's house. Throughout the story, Julio has been facing backlash from Blanca over his involvement with Sapo. Sapo and Julio are best friends, and Julio always opts to help Sapo. His loyalty to Sapo comes first, despite the fact that it causes strife in his marriage. Julio is heartbroken that Blanca is leaving him (at least for now), but he still won't rat out Sapo to the police to save his marriage. Quiñonez thus stresses how important the friendship between Sapo and Julio is by showing that Julio will tolerate deep personal loss to do right by Sapo. This kind of loyalty, for Quiñonez, is a hallmark of disenfranchised communities who feel that they have nobody watching out for them except one another. It highlights the oppression such people face, the solidarity they need to cultivate to survive, and the personal costs that can be involved.

I would never have guessed he was Latin. He was more American than Mickey Mouse and just as old.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Veronica "Vera" Vidal , Willie Bodega , Sapo, John Vidal (Vera's husband)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

As the book approaches its climax, Sapo lures Julio to a restaurant where Vera's husband, John Vidal, is waiting for a confrontation with Vera, who's presumably leaving him for Bodega. As Julio sits with John Vidal, he notices how strongly John masks his Latinx identity. Just like Vera (who changed her name from Veronica to Vera), John was likely original named "Juan" before anglicizing his name. He also dresses "more American than Mickey Mouse," meaning that he tries to look like a white American man rather than a Cuban immigrant. Vidal's appearance shows that oppression can make Latinx people believe society's views about their culture as inferior. People who are wealthy, like John Vidal, often try to hide their Latinx roots because they believe they'll lose respect in other people's eyes for being non-white. This behavior is problematic because it reinforces the notion that Latinx people can't be successful or wealthy—only white people can. Latinx people who desire upward mobility therefore try to look and act whiter, further diminishing the presence of Latinx culture in wealthy circles.

Book 3, Eulogy Quotes

Everyone was there like in some pageant for a dying monarch. And to pass the hours on fire, Bodega tales began winding around the avenue. Almost everyone had one, and those that didn't added to the tales by retelling them.

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Willie Bodega

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

In the final passages of the book, Bodega is shot dead in the street before he can realize his dream of saving Spanish Harlem from gentrification and empowering the Latinx community who live there now. Despite Bodega's untimely death, Julio's reflections show that although Bodega didn't fulfill his dream, he did nonetheless leave behind a legacy. The community comes out in full force to honor him, sharing stories and bonding over how much he helped them all. This brings them closer together and fosters a sense of solidarity, which was one of Bodega's chief goals before he died. Bodega thinks that solidarity in a community is essential for it to thrive, especially in a corrupt society: when a community faces systemic oppression, they can lean on one another (instead of the state, which oppresses them) to pull through and collectively fight for better lives. Although Bodega is killed before he can realize his dreams, it's clear that his efforts didn't entirely fail—Bodega's actions had a palpable effect on the community that brings them closer and makes them feel stronger.

"Willie Bodega doesn't exist [...] I'm sorry. [...] *Pera!* [...] You can stay with me."

Related Characters: Julio Mercado (speaker), Hipolito , Geran , Willie Bodega

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

As Julio walks home from Bodega's funeral, he's approached by an old man named Geran and a little boy named Hipolito. They've just arrived in New York from Puerto Rico, and they're looking for Bodega because they heard he helps people. Julio bitterly tells them that "Willie Bodega doesn't exist." But as Geran and Hipolito are walking away, Julio feels bad for them and offers to host them himself. It seems that although Bodega died before his dreams could be fully realized, his ideals made an impact on Julio. Here, Julio begins to offer the sort of community support that Bodega always encouraged—Geran even suspects that Julio might actually *be* Bodega himself. Julio's actions imply that although Bodega is dead, he's not entirely gone. His ideals live on through the people whose lives he touched, like Julio. Quiñonez thus concludes the story with a silver lining: there's hope for the future because people who believe in Bodega's vision will carry it forward.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1, ROUND 1: SPANISH FOR "TOAD"

Julio explains that Sapo is different: Sapo relies on himself, bites when he fights, and loves himself. Julio wishes he could be as self-reliant as Sapo. Sapo's real name is Enrique, but he's always been called Sapo because he looks like a happy, laughing toad. Having a nickname gives you status on the block; People without nicknames get kicked around. Julio wants one too, but he has to fight to earn one.

Quiñonez opens his story by describing the close friendship between narrator Julio and his best friend, Sapo. Although their lives will diverge as the story develops, the loyalty between them remains intact, anchoring the plot. Julio's talk of nicknames and fighting shows that the environment he's growing up in is a little rough around the edges.

Julio thinks it's easy to fight when you hate yourself—when you live in projects in Spanish Harlem with junkies, rapists, and whores, among burned-down buildings and vacant lots full of decaying stolen cars. Deaths—from shootings, holdups, fires, or overdoses—are normal here. People's mothers often knock on doors asking people like Julio to commemorate their dead sons with graffiti for a few bucks. Julio knows he has to become one of these guys or spend his time getting beaten up by them.

Julio's opening description of Spanish Harlem, the story's setting, shows that it's a neighborhood riddled with crime, poverty, and drugs. Quiñonez lets the reader know that this is a part of the city that's deeply disenfranchised and facing a lot of social problems. This is important, as the story's plot revolves around attempts—both old and new—to improve the neighborhood.

Julio goes to Junior High School 99—or "Jailhouse 99"—on 100th Street and First Avenue. The white teachers have power and seniority but don't bother teaching much because they think the kids will all end up as delinquents. The Hispanic teachers don't have "switchblade tempers" or names like Maria or Anita. They make the kids work hard and try to teach them self-respect, but they have little say in how they school is run. In social science, the students just learn about Italy (even though they hate Italians and avoid their neighborhood). The school was even renamed after Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos, but the kids never learn about people like that. They're convinced that their own people have no culture—so they hate themselves and look for fights.

Julio's description of his school shows the systemic oppression that Latinx immigrants face. In mentioning "Maria" and "Anita" (two characters in the movie West Side Story*) Julio implies that movies and other media falsely depict Latinx people as unstable and violent (or as people with "switchblade tempers"). Julio also shows that the white teachers with power ignore and undermine Latinx students in their classrooms, and Latinx culture in their curricula, which makes immigrant students feel disillusioned about their own prospects.*

Julio eventually gets over his dislike for hitting people and starts fighting. With Sapo in his corner, Julio earns the nickname Chino, on account of his straight, black, Ecuadorian hair and his almond eyes, which make him look a bit Chinese. Names are a mark of respect; other kids earn names like Indio if they look a bit Caribbean or Batista if they like music but fight well. Most kids at school carry *jigas* ("knives") but rarely use them. One kid is famous for using his to slash people's faces when he fights, leaving ear-to-ear-scars known as Kool Aid smiles, so he's known as Junior Jiga.

Julio shows that loyalty between friends is an empowering resource for young children in this violent environment: his friendship with Sapo earns him credibility and respect among his peers. The violence Julio mentions implies that Spanish Harlem's residents are left to fend for themselves by the city's legislators, who largely turn a blind eye. Julio also shows that children are lured into fighting and street politics to gain respect—something they don't get from authority figures like their white teachers.

Julio explains that Sapo is always himself around everybody, even girls. He even cusses around Nancy Saldivia, whom everybody has a crush on. She's an angelic girl with tan skin, hazel eyes and brown-blond hair. She's intelligent, polite, and she always carries a Bible, so everyone calls her Blanca. Blanca hangs around with Lucy, a hairy girl who can't shave her legs because of her religion. All the guys—except Sapo, who doesn't care—want to protect Blanca even though they know they won't get far with her. She almost makes them want to go to church.

Even at a young age, the children fetishize religious girls like Blanca as pure, "angelic," and in need of protection by men. Later, however, Julio will argue that the Bible's values (and the churchgoing practices of the community in Spanish Harlem) infuses Latinx people with sexist values that disempower women—particularly by depicting women as people who need to be perpetually saved by men.

Julio loves the adventures he has with Sapo—like smoking **marijuana**, making bets, and flying kites with razor blades attached to cut down other kites—even though Julio's mother doesn't approve. Julio's father gets it, though—he doesn't lose his cool when Julio comes home with a black eye, and he knows it's good for Julio to have a guy like Sapo watching his back. Reflecting back on that time, Julio knows that Sapo's friendship was the core of his adolescence. Like Julio's mother, Blanca (who's the center of Julio's adulthood) can't quite understand this.

The reader learns that Julio and Blanca will eventually end up together, and that their relationship will become strained by Julio's loyalty to his best friend Sapo. Nonetheless, it's clear that Sapo's friendship is essential to Julio—they provide each other with solidarity as they face the violent streets of their youth, and it helps them to avoid becoming demoralized by their surroundings. Sapo's friendship is thus deeply empowering for Julio despite the friction it causes with others.

BOOK 1, ROUND 2: WILLIE BODEGA

In eighth grade, Julio gets into the High School of Art and Design on 57th Street and Second Avenue. He spends less time in East Harlem, and his world changes. Sapo has already dropped out, so they see each other less often, but they still have each other's backs. Julio becomes obsessed with the Futurist mantra of burning museums and reinventing culture. Julio relates to the Futurists' anger and wants to reinvent himself. Blanca feels the same way. She hates it when people change their names—from Juan to John, or Veronica to Vera. When Julio hears this, he wants to marry Blanca on the spot. They enroll in Hunter College and get married the next year. Blanca's company makes life seem less dirty and unjust.

By the time Sapo and Julio are teenagers, their lives have diverged: Julio is headed for college, while Sapo is headed for a life of petty crime on the street. Nonetheless, Julio stresses that the loyalty between them is unbreakable. Julio and Blanca's hopes of empowering themselves with education without abandoning their Latin culture introduce an important idea that the plot revolves around. They, like others in the story, have a strong motivation to improve their lives without erasing their cultural roots (unlike people who change their names to sound more white).

Looking back, Julio realizes that he's drawn to Willie Bodega because Bodega also wants to change things. Bodega still believes in dreams. He changes Julio and Blanca's lives, and he changes the neighborhood. To get to Bodega, Julio has to go through Sapo. Sapo often shows up at night asking Julio to look after package, which drives Blanca crazy—she knows it's **drugs**. Blanca doesn't respect Sapo because he hasn't tried to better himself or get out of El Barrio. Julio gets angry and snaps back that maybe Sapo likes it here—not everybody wants a house and kids. Blanca is almost finished studying at Hunter, and she's annoyed that Julio's slacking—especially with an unexpected baby coming.

Quiñonez introduces the story's anti-hero, Willie Bodega. The reader learns that Bodega's actions similarly revolve around improving the lives of people in Spanish Harlem. Meanwhile, there is a deep tension between Blanca (who's keen to avoid illegal activity) and Sapo (who's a drug dealer). It's clear that Julio's loyalty to Sapo is unwavering—even if it causes problems in his marriage. Hence, Quiñonez shows that loyalty is something that people take very seriously in this community.

Blanca warns Julio that if he's up to anything with Sapo, or if he gets into any trouble with the police, she wants to hear it from Julio first, so she can decide if she's going to leave. Julio, exasperated, explains that he's here, that he's never been in trouble, and that Sapo would never pull him into trouble. Blanca knows that Julio just had to act macho in school. She hates that Julio had terrible teachers, and that the only things that matter in this neighborhood are what people can break or steal. Blanca knows that Sapo is Julio's friend, but she doesn't trust Sapo's other friends. Julio knows that Blanca is right, but he won't admit it, and he tells her to go to sleep.

Quiñonez highlights more clearly the tension that Julio's loyalty to Sapo causes in his relationship with Blanca. Blanca nods to the oppression that Latinx men face: the teachers have no respect for the students, so the students become disillusioned about their futures and get lured into lives of crime (just as Sapo has). Julio's loyalty to Sapo prevents him from agreeing with Blanca, even though she is clearly correct in her assessment of the detrimental effects of systemic oppression on immigrant men.

By Blanca's second trimester, she's given up fighting with Julio and becomes hopeless. She gets upset every time Julio goes to hang out with Sapo. Blanca wishes Julio was more religious, but Julio thinks a Pentecostal church full of Latino people is like a circus: there are tambourines, peoples throwing themselves on the floor, the pastor screaming that Christ is coming, and the band playing salsa. He just can't handle it. Admittedly, the Pentecostals have the prettiest girls, and Julio knows he's married the prettiest one. Just as Julio needed Sapo growing up, he needs Blanca now to make him feel valuable.

Julio is unwavering in his loyalty to Sapo, even though it's causing a tremendous strain in his marriage. This implies that loyalty is so valuable to the story's characters that they'll uphold it even when it comes at a personal loss (like a strained marriage). Julio introduces the idea that he's skeptical about the churchgoing crowd, which puts him at odds with a significant aspect of Harlem's immigrant community and could potential alienate him. Meanwhile, Julio indicates that loyalty is important to him because it gives him a sense of self-worth and identity.

One day, Sapo calls asking Julio to drop the package off in Hunter's library for some rich guy's party. Julio gets annoyed but Sapo explains that he's stuck in the Bronx and just really needs the favor. Julio is scared—not of the cops, but of Blanca. In the end, Julio takes the package to Hunter without telling Blanca. The next evening, Sapo shows up and gives Julio $50 from Willie Bodega. This the first time Julio has heard of Bodega. Reflecting on that night, Julio now knows that Bodega—and Bodega's dreams for Spanish Harlem—eclipsed anything that Blanca or Sapo meant to him, even if Bodega broke a few laws to find "his way back to dignity."

Once again, Julio's loyalty to Sapo wins out over his deference to the law or to his wife. The reader learns a bit more about Bodega: it seems that Bodega wants to empower Spanish Harlem, and that he breaks the law to do so. Quiñonez uses Julio's positive characterization of Bodega's actions to imply that breaking the law is justified if there's a worthy social cause involved, such as empowering a community and claiming a sense of "dignity" under oppression.

BOOK 1, ROUND 3: WILLIE BODEGA DON'T SELL ROCKS. WILLIE BODEGA SELLS DREAMS.

One night, Blanca is working on a paper while Julio is procrastinating, which annoys Blanca as usual. Sapo knocks on the door because Bodega wants to meet Julio. Blanca immediately gets upset and holds her belly, warning Julio that she gets stressed when he leaves with Sapo. Julio pleads with Blanca, and she storms off to call her sister Negra (her real name is Deborah, but people call her Negra on account of her being the total opposite of the saintly Blanca). As Julio grabs his jacket, Sapo smiles happily and observes that Julio married a difficult one.

As before, Quiñonez highlights that Julio's loyalty to Sapo persists even though it causes tension in his marriage and his wife's pregnancy. Julio's procrastination implies that maybe he is demotivated by school and subconsciously seeking for another way to empower himself. The reader learns that Blanca's sister Negra is the opposite of her—meaning that Negra, too, likely dabbles in street politics. This reinforces the idea that many people in Spanish Harlem are pushed into lives centered on street crime because of the oppression they face as Latinx immigrants.

Sapo explains that Bodega wants something from Julio. They head to a butcher shop called Casablanca nearby. Outside, people are sitting on milk crates and playing dominoes. Bodega's brother Nene lets them inside, where Bodega sizes Julio up, says it's good that Julio's in college, and concludes that Julio's alright. Bodega explains that he intends to own the neighborhood and talks about how Puerto Rican people fought in wars but don't get respect when they apply for jobs. He looks sad and angry, explaining that they have to take their share if they can't get it legally. Julio is hesitant—he doesn't like people who ramble. He's about to leave, but Bodega pulls out a giant bag of **marijuana**.

Bodega alludes to another aspect of the oppression that Latinx immigrants face in New York: they've shown loyalty to the U.S. by fighting in wars, but white Americans still tend to treat them like second-class citizens. This suggests that the government and the elite politicians who run the system take more from Latinx immigrants than they give back, which characterizes U.S. society as exploitative. Bodega argues that breaking the law is not wrong when the people in charge of the law are already cheating Latinx immigrants.

The guys **smoke** and share crude banter about the women in a Playboy magazine. Bodega wants Julio to team up with his associate Nazario, a lawyer who's helping Bodega buy and renovate buildings in the neighborhood. Nazario has been hustling to get other Puerto Ricans from the community helping with wiring and roofing, even though the cops make fun of them for trying to build "Machu Picchu" in El Barrio. So far, Bodega has placed 14 families from the neighborhood in renovated homes with cheap rent. Bodega explains that if the community needs something—rent money, shoes, or kids baseball uniforms—he takes care of it. All he wants is their loyalty; he knows they'll riot if anything happens to him.

Bodega reveals that he's involved in a project (along with Nazario) to improve the neighborhood, centering on providing housing, financial support, and educational resources. This shows that even though Bodega seems like a shady character who smokes cannabis and reads Playboy magazine, he's engaging in activism directed at the empowerment of Spanish Harlem's Latinx community. Bodega only asks for loyalty in return for his efforts because he believes it will help people band together and find a sense of solidarity with one another, which will be essential for weathering difficult moments in his project of community empowerment. Quiñonez also implies that the Latinx community can't rely on the police, whom he depicts as racist, unhelpful, and uninformed about Latinx culture. (Machu Picchu is in Peru, while the people in the story are predominantly Puerto-Rican.)

Bodega explains that when the Black Panthers took off in the 1960s, the Puerto Rican community—including himself—started their own movement called the Young Lords. They cleaned up the neighborhood and lobbied with local government for funds. When their requests for support were denied, the Young Lords organized a riot, and the police came down on them hard. After that, they began "preaching Que Pasa Power," stashing guns and smuggling resources through a local church. Even the old ladies helped. Bodega hustled **heroin** until he met Nazario and left the Young Lords. As Bodega is talking, Sapo gets up and heads down to the deli for some beers.

Bodega's backstory shows that he's been involved in community activism for most of his adult life. His failed efforts to empower the community by legal means shows that city officials are corrupt and reluctant to help Spanish Harlem. Quiñonez implies, through Bodega's voice, that when legal efforts at social improvement are blocked, activists are justified in turning to other means because they have no choice. The mantra "Que Pasa Power" is borrowed from a poem about the disenfranchisement of Latinx immigrants by Puerto Rican immigrant poet Pedro Pietri. It similarly argues that Puerto Rican immigrants are deeply oppressed and have no choice but to use whatever means necessary to empower themselves. The allusion to Pietri's poetry also shows that Puerto Ricans have made a substantive contribution to U.S. culture, even though the white teachers at Julio's elementary school taught the children to believe otherwise.

BOOK 1, ROUND 4: THE FIRE THIS TIME

Julio, still skeptical, asks how Bodega gets around the IRS. Bodega explains that Nazario set up a company called the Harry Goldstein Real Estate Agency to keep everything above board (though there's no Harry Goldstein behind it, only Bodega). Bodega wants Julio to help him and become a role model for the Puerto Rican community. Julio, still skeptical, explains that he's only half Puerto Rican—his father is from Ecuador. Bodega, however, is unfazed. He wants to buy El Barrio for the community—one burned-out lot at a time—until he owns the whole neighborhood, the way the Kennedys owned Boston. Bodega thinks that if his plan goes well, there might even be a Nuyorican president one day.

As Bodega divulges more of his plan, the reader learns that he aims to preserve the neighborhood for the immigrants, so that they can stay in Spanish Harlem instead of being displaced by gentrification. That way, they'll ideally be able to find a sense of empowerment in their Nuyorican (half New York, half Puerto Rican) culture. Bodega's mention of the Kennedys (President John F. Kennedy's wealthy and illustrious family line) implies that what he's doing is no different to what American politicians do to secure wealth for themselves and other people in their communities.

Bodega realizes Julio has **smoked** too much, and Sapo cracks a joke about how Julio isn't allowed to smoke at home. Julio denies it to save face, but he knows—as all Latin men do—that women are in charge at home, and they're terrifying. They'll stab you if you wrong them, and them going to jail means little if you're dead. Julio likes Bodega's honest dishonesty. Julio thinks that social change can't happen by the books, and it won't happen through God: revolutions need people like Bodega. Julio knows Spanish Harlem needs his help: rents are rising, and social services are being cut. But he also doesn't want to lose Blanca, so he passes on the offer. Bodega thinks that's a shame.

Julio's reflection about Latinx women shows that they actually hold a lot of power and agency within their communities. In mentioning women and God, Julio subtly hints that he thinks religion disempowers women (by depicting them as weak instead of powerful) and Latinx people in general (because it doesn't motivate them to fight for social change, but rather to tolerate their poverty and wait for salvation). Julio also reinforces the idea that activists sometimes need to break the law to make changes happen, particularly when people are treated unfairly by the those who administer the law (like police and politicians).

Julio gets up to leave, and jokes around with Nene at the door. Outside, Sapo is upset. He recommended Julio to Bodega, and know he feels like a fool. Julio feels annoyed. He doesn't mind looking after a package now and then, and he knows Bodega wants to help the community, but he thinks that Bodega also wants to get rich. Sapo grows angry and says that Julio acts like he cares about other people but when it comes down to things, Julio is just as selfish as everyone else. Sapo drives off, yelling at Julio to go home to his "church girl."

Julio's hesitance to join Bodega creates a rift in his friendship with Sapo—it feels to Sapo like a violation of their loyalty to each other, which is clearly important to both of them. Quiñonez also implies (through Sapo's voice) that the community's empowerment as a whole is a worthier cause than a person's individual efforts to improve their own life. This subtly implies why loyalty is so important: it fosters a sense of solidarity among people in the community, and it encourages them to empower one another rather than focusing solely on themselves.

BOOK 1, ROUND 5: WE NEEDED MORE SPACE

Julio wanders around the neighborhood trying to walk off his high. He strolls down Fifth Avenue, past El Museo del Barrio on 104th Street reminiscing about playing with Sapo there. He walks down towards the rich people's houses, remembering his mother taking him into some of them when she was a cleaner. They look like fancy museums inside, and nothing like the homes a few blocks north. Julio gets home and slips into bed. He wants to make love to Blanca to show her that he's not interested in other women and finds her sexy in her pregnancy, but she tells him that he smells like **marijuana**.

Julio's nostalgia about playing with Sapo in the streets of Spanish Harlem shows that his friendship has instilled in him a sense of loyalty to the neighborhood. This sort of feeling—of caring for one another and for the neighborhood—is what Bodega wants to encourage in all the neighborhood's residents. Julio's description of his mother's cleaning jobs highlights unjust economic disparities between wealthy white people and poor immigrant people who live side by side.


Blanca and Julio discuss baby names. Blanca suggests Julio for a boy, and Julio suggests Vera for a girl, recalling Blanca's aunt Veronica who married a rich Cuban and moved to Miami. Blanca explains that Veronica wanted to marry a street activist, a Young Lord, but her mother was against it. Julio thinks about Bodega, and something clicks. He tells Blanca that he loves her and that he'll fix things for her. Blanca jokes that it's probably best her aunt didn't marry the Young Lord, because he ended up in jail. Bored of this topic, Blanca tries to encourage Julio to come to church with her in two weeks. Julio agrees blankly, his mind still on Bodega.

Quiñonez introduces a central component of the plot here: it's implied that Julio realizes Bodega must be the jailed activist whom Veronica was in love with. Julio now knows that Bodega wants access to Veronica, which inspires Julio to start scheming about what he can get in return for offering to connect them. But while Julio is scheming about pragmatic ways to improve his circumstances, Blanca insists that going to church is the path to empowerment. Julio, however, clearly disagrees.


Julio looks around the small apartment he lives in with Blanca. He thinks about their high tuition bills and the extra space they'll need once the baby arrives. He reasons that if Bodega wants something from him, he can get some of the things he needs in return, acknowledging that this is how "street politics" works.

In scheming to make a trade with Bodega, Julio exposes the way things get done in Spanish Harlem, a system he refers to as "street politics." This implies that people already have to help one another to get ahead, meaning there's already a bourgeoning sense of community among those who dabble in street politics (which Bodega wants to encourage further).

BOOK 1, ROUND 6: QUE VIVA CHANGÓ

The next day, Julio's is at work at the supermarket, pricing cans with a sticker gun. After work, before his evening class, Julio stops by the La Reyna bakery for a bite to eat. It's a crowded, noisy hole in the wall with great Latin food. Inside, Julio spots Sapo, and they smooth things over. Julio isn't sure if Bodega wants him to work with Nazario, or if he really just wants to contact Blanca's aunt Vera. Sapo hushes Julio for talking about Bodega in public but confirms that Bodega is likely after both of those things. Sapo offers Julio a ride to Hunter, which Julio reluctantly accepts.

Julio has to work a (presumably minimum-wage) job at a supermarket while also pursuing college, which alludes to his disenfranchisement. The La Reyna bakery shows that Spanish Harlem is packed with positive examples of Latinx culture, once again contradicting the false belief among Julio and Sapo's teachers that Latinx immigrants have nothing to offer U.S. society.

On the way, they pick up Nene and a live chicken in a box (a religious offering from Bodega for Doña Ramonita). Julio hopes he hasn't missed his chance to be the connection Bodega needs to contact Vera. They arrive at Doña Ramonita's store—a *botanica* with cheap religious statues that doubles up as a pawn shop. Doña Ramonita emerges wearing white robes and puts a leash on the chicken. She gives Sapo instructions for Bodega to follow by pouring jars of water on himself at sunrise.

A botanica is a store that sells religious goods, and it's where people in the community go to access indigenous cultural traditions like the ritual involving the chicken. Once again, Quiñonez shows that Spanish Harlem is packed with interesting cultural phenomena—in contrast to what Latinx children in the neighborhood are taught at school.

Doña Ramonita says she's foreseen that the woman Bodega is looking for will come from a hot climate. When they turn to leave, Julio tells Sapo he can reach Vera for Bodega, but he wants a two-bedroom apartment in exchange. Sapo swears angrily: he wishes Julio had told him that before he put a smelly chicken in his car.

Quiñonez's comedic interlude involving the chicken exposes another reason why Sapo and Julio's bond, as well as bonds within a community in general, are important. Such bonds enable people to joke around with one another, which brings a much-needed lightness to their tough day-to-day lives.

BOOK 1, ROUND 7: FOR BEING A CABRÓN

Julio seeks out Blanca's sister Negra to make contact with Vera. Negra lives in the projects on 100th Street and First Avenue, which have panoramic views but are cheap because they're in Spanish Harlem. When Julio enters, he hears Negra and her husband Victor fighting. Victor has a deep gash in his chest: Negra has stabbed Victor because she thinks he went to the movies with another woman. Victor is adamant that he doesn't want to go to Metropolitan (the nearest hospital), but he eventually agrees to go to another one farther away, explaining in hushed tones to Julio that his mistress works at the closer hospital. Negra follows them out, kissing Victor and apologizing as he bleeds profusely.

The panoramic views from the projects on 100th Street imply that there's a lot of potential for Spanish Harlem to become a desirable urban neighborhood—but it's been largely ignored by the city, rendering it cheap and crime-ridden instead. Victor's infidelity (and denial of his infidelity, even though it's true) shows that a strand of disrespect for women runs through Latinx culture. Julio will later argue that the church reinforces this disrespect.

Julio calls Negra from the hospital, explaining that he needs to contact Vera. Negra is suspicious, but she agrees, because she owes Julio a favor for telling the hospital that Victor fell on a knife and wasn't stabbed. When Julio gets home, he finds Blanca holding a contract for a two-bedroom apartment that's half the price of theirs. Blanca is fuming because Julio didn't discuss any of this with her first, and she feels like Julio keeps her in the dark about things. They patch things up and lie down together as Blanca holds her belly.

Julio will later argue that the Bible is problematic because the male characters do things without consulting their wives. Yet Julio is also guilty of the same thing: he's scheming to get an apartment behind Blanca's back, which makes Blanca feel disrespected. Blanca thinks that Julio is sexist. Julio, however, thinks that he can't confide in Blanca because a lot of things he does (like engaging with criminals like Bodega) conflict with her religious views.

Blanca asks Julio if he knows anyone looking to get married. She's trying to fix up a girl from her church named Claudia who isn't the best catch (because she's not a virgin and not very pretty). It turns out that Claudia, who's from Columbia, needs a green card quickly. Julio's annoyed. They don't have time for this, and he thinks that Blanca is naïve for trying to avoid street politics to solve this girl's immigration problem. Blanca wonders if she should ask Negra, but she's hesitant because Negra is a handful.

Claudia's situation subtly hints at sexism within the church community—it implies that women are only valued for their looks and perceived sexual purity, not for their personalities or intellect. Julio's frustration shows that Blanca would be able to help Claudia more by turning to the underground community of Spanish Harlem. Thus, Blanca's blanket belief that all illegal activity is immoral actually hinders rather than helps her.

Negra and Blanca are total opposites: while Blanca was drawn to the church as an adolescent, Negra was smoking **weed** and sneaking out of the house. Negra also knows everything that's going on in the neighborhood; she even knows why a gay man named Popcorn was found stabbed to death on his rooftop. Julio reflects that the police, as always, asked around but didn't follow up—they never do if the media doesn't get wind of it. Negra, however, knows that a girl named Inelda Aldino killed Popcorn over an argument about which of them had better hair. Negra didn't tell the cops, but she told everyone in the neighborhood, and eventually somebody tipped off the cops.

The sad story about Popcorn's fate exposes more systemic oppression that's in play in Spanish Harlem: the police don't really care about making the neighborhood safer. Yet Negra is actually able to bring about justice and safety by relying on her community network. This hints at why Bodega wants to strengthen the sense of solidarity among Spanish Harlem's residents: it helps them to do the work that the system should be doing to care for their community, like bringing murderers to justice.

Blanca is convinced that they can find somebody to marry Claudia, even if it's a sham marriage for the paperwork. She urges Julio to ask around on the street. Suddenly, Negra calls to tell Blanca about the drama with Victor; Julio is relieved at the distraction. After they chat, Negra asks for Julio and explains that Vera is coming to town for a high school reunion. Julio asks Negra not say anything about this to Blanca, and Negra agrees but says that Julio owes her. Julio agrees reluctantly, knowing he's going to regret it.

Blanca and Julio are both getting drawn into the quasi-legal underground subculture of Spanish Harlem despite the fact that they both want to avoid it. This implies—once again—that people in the neighborhood don't have other resources available to help them in times of need. They have to rely on one another, even if they veer into illegal territory.

BOOK 1, ROUND 8: NO PETS ALLOWED

The next day, Sapo calls, saying that he needs a favor: he wants Julio to hold onto a package for him. Julio agrees as usual, and he tells Sapo he has news for Bodega. That night, around 10:30 p.m., Julio and Blanca are walking home from the subway, exhausted after a long day at Hunter. They spot Sapo's car waiting outside their apartment. Blanca is annoyed, but to everyone's surprise, she lets it slide—though she cracks a joke about how their new apartment doesn't allow pets, so Sapo won't be able to come around anymore. Julio stashes Sapo's envelope and jokes more with Blanca. She seems to be in a better mood than usual and asks Julio not to come home too late.

Quiñonez highlights the persistent tension that Julio's loyalty to Sapo causes in his marriage. Despite Blanca's reluctance to endorse Sapo's activities, it seems she knows that Julio's involvement with Sapo is somehow helping them get a better apartment. Once again, Quiñonez hints that the underground community, for all its failings, is able to come through with tangible improvements to Julio and Blanca's lives much faster than their lengthy plan of educating themselves part time and working to save for a better home.

Sapo and Julio arrive at the Taino Towers on 124th Street and Third Avenue, where Bodega is holding court in one of his many apartments. Nene answers the door and tells them to wait. Bodega is talking with Nazario about a man named Alberto Salazar. Bodega introduces Julio to Nazario, and Nazario is happy to hear that Julio is in college. Nazario and Bodega reflect on how good it will be to have another college-educated kid in the neighborhood. They reason optimistically that soon El Barrio will house an "army" of educated young professional people, and nobody will be able to take the neighborhood away from them.

Nazario and Bodega want to empower Latinx culture by building a middle class that will make others in the U.S. finally respect Latinx people instead of denigrating them. Bodega and Nazario refer to upwardly mobile Latinx youths as an "army" because they believe they're engaged in a class war. In other words, they think that New York's political elite use systemic oppression to prevent Latinx people from gaining access to better jobs and better lives to capitalize on cheap immigrant labor that keeps them rich and powerful.

Nazario steps out to talk with Sapo, and Julio drops the news that Vera is coming to town. Bodega gets excited and starts pestering Julio with questions. Julio wonders if Bodega even wants advice on what to wear. Then, Nazario comes back in and says he needs to talk to Bodega—alone. Julio is relieved—the less he knows about street business, the better. Julio excuses himself and chats with Nene at the door. Nene isn't too bright, and he mostly talks in nonsensical song lyrics. Julio hears Bodega and Nazario say the name Alberto Salazar again. Julio is relieved that he'll be done with this business soon and living with Blanca in a nice apartment without having to hide anything from her.

Quiñonez continues to flesh out the disenfranchisement and marginalization that Spanish Harlem's residents face. Here, it seems that Bodega's brother Nene is neurologically atypical (as he struggles with adult conversation) and may have special needs. Nonetheless, there don't seem to be resources available for his care, so Bodega takes care of Nene himself by taking Nene with him everywhere he goes.

BOOK 1, ROUND 9: KNOCKOUT: UNDERGROUND ECONOMY

The next Saturday morning, Sapo knocks on Julio's door: Bodega wants to meet Julio at El Museo del Barrio. Sapo explains that the museum isn't open yet, but they'll open for Bodega, who donates a lot of money to them. Julio is surprised to hear that Bodega gives money to the arts, and he presses Sapo for information about how Bodega got so much power. Sapo explains that the neighborhood used to be run by the Italian mafia—they even controlled the tenements to segregate the Italians from the Latino and black residents. But when their big boss Fat Tony Salerno went to prison, he had to sell off a bunch of buildings for legal fees; Bodega, along with Nazario, swooped in.

Quiñonez reveals that Bodega is a benefactor of the arts. This shows another way in which Bodega aims to empower the neighborhood: by supporting the artistic and cultural scene. The reader learns that this corner of Manhattan—now known as Spanish Harlem—has been occupied by ethnically diverse immigrants for years. The fact that the neighborhood is still poor means that immigrants have been oppressed in New York for a long time—at least for several generations.

On the drive over to the museum, Julio asks Sapo if he knows anyone who'd be willing to marry a Columbian girl who needs a green card. Sapo suggests a neighborhood **junkie**, but Julio thinks that's a terrible idea. Sapo suggests asking Nazario, but Julio doesn't want to get mixed up with Bodega and Nazario any more than already he has. The museum guard lets Julio in after he realizes that Julio is there to meet Bodega, who's inside looking at a painting.

Blanca's Columbian friend's predicament exposes another component of the disenfranchisement that some Latinx immigrants face: many people wind up undocumented when they try to seek better lives. In this case, U.S.-backed drug raids in Colombia during the 1980s and 1990s triggered widespread violence and political instability, causing many people to flee.

Julio reflects that he likes the museum a lot because the guards don't follow him around like they do at the Metropolitan Museum. Bodega explains that he's going to marry Vera, despite the fact that she's already married, meaning he'll soon be related to Julio and Blanca. Julio is skeptical about this, but Bodega is certain. Bodega explains that Vera loves him but she was worried about Bodega's ability to support her. Her current husband, John Vidal, fled Cuba in 1958 with a lot of dirty money. Vera's mother—who didn't like the look of Bodega at all—pushed Vera into the marriage.

In noting that the guards at museums often follow him around, Julio exposes yet another facet of the oppression that Latinx people face. They're perceived as delinquents by others in society, so they are treated like criminals whenever they leave the neighborhood. This demoralizes them and deters them from engaging in many aspects of life outside their own neighborhood, further isolating them from New York society at large.

Back then, the Young Lords were a guerilla group with guns and a manifesto. They wanted to liberate Puerto Rico from the United States, encourage self-governance in Latin countries, install community programs, and battle *machismo* (macho) culture. Bodega explains that Vera fell in love with his optimism and they used to go to rallies and Marx classes together. What Vera really wanted, however, was for Bodega to have a plan for making an income; he's convinced that he has that now. Julio wonders if Vera will want to walk away from her husband's money, which upsets Bodega. Bodega looks Julio in the eyes and says he'll ask Julio for something—not yet, but soon.

Quiñonez uses Bodega's memories about the Young Lords to imply that the island of Puerto Rico is under U.S. control, but it's denied essential resources that the island's residents need to improve their lives. He subtly implies that there's a parallel between the way the U.S. government treats Puerto Rico and the way New York's politicians treat Spanish Harlem. Quiñonez also thinks that machismo *culture (which champions the bravado of men) is regressive. Julio will later argue that the church exacerbates this issue.*


The next day, Julio and Blanca move into their new apartment with the help of Negra and Victor. Victor is still healing from his stab wound, but they're both acting very affectionate. A couple of days later, Julio comes home and flips on the television: the news says that an undercover journalist named Alberto Salazar has been found dead in the East River, his body bearing a gunshot wound and a bite mark. Julio immediately knows who killed Salazar.

Julio remembers that he heard Bodega, Nazario, and Sapo talking about Salazar earlier, meaning that they are likely responsible for the murder. So far, Quiñonez has implied that the men dabble in drug-related crime, but here, he ups the stakes: it seems that they are also involved in a murder. This is a much bigger moral issue for Julio (and, by extension, the reader) to wrestle with in weighing what level of crime is justified in the name of activism.

BOOK 2, ROUND 1: MY GROWING UP AND ALL THAT PIRI THOMAS KINDA CRAP

Julio narrates that Sapo is different: he's not afraid to bite in a fight. Julio loves Sapo, but it's all really about Bodega, who has a "blend of nobility and street"—as if God couldn't decide if Bodega should be a leader or a thug. When news of Salazar's death gets out, the neighborhood is somber. Julio guesses that Blanca got suspicious when the news reports mentioned biting—she's seen Sapo's bites.

It seems that the bite mark on Salazar's body has something to do with Sapo, meaning he's definitely involved in the murder. Quiñonez uses this plot point to pivot back to Julio and Sapo's oppressive experiences in school—where the backstory for Sapo's biting habit unfolds. On another note, Bodega's "blend of nobility and street" further complicates the morality of Bodega's actions for the reader, as Julio suggests that even God can't reconcile Bodega's criminal activities with his honorable intentions.

Julio thinks about his high school days: he recalls the English teacher Mr. Blessington, who tells the kids they're going to end up in jail or become prostitutes. Julio hates Mr. Blessington's upper-middle-class attitude, his obsession with Robert Frost, and the creepy way he looks at Blanca. The science teacher, Mr. Tapia, in contrast, encourages the kids. He thinks they're lucky to be Latin and bilingual. One day, Sapo doesn't do his homework and uses Mr. Blessington's put-downs as an excuse, saying there's no point. Mr. Tapia says that should give all the kids *more* motivation to do their homework—so they can prove Mr. Blessington wrong. Mr. Tapia says Rita Moreno and Reggie Jackson worked hard, and that's what the kids have to do.

Quiñonez uses the character of Mr. Blessington to exemplify the systemic oppression faced by Latinx students in schools. Mr. Blessington's racism and classism makes him think that Latinx culture offers nothing of value (which is why he only teaches white poets like Robert Frost). He also thinks that Latinx students are delinquents, which demotivates students like Sapo to bother with school. Mr. Tapia, on the other hand, exemplifies the immigrant teachers who try to motivate Latinx students (by citing successful Latinx role models like Rita Moreno and Reggie Jackson) to counteract the harmful impact of teachers like Mr. Blessington.

In the next English class, Julio asks why they have to study Robert Frost again, and not, say, Julia de Burgos, who's also a poet. Mr. Blessington snaps back that this is English class, not Spanish class. He thinks that Robert Frost is a great American poet, that Julia de Burgos was a nobody, and that the school board was idiotic to name the school after her. When Mr. Blessington says that Sapo would be lucky to get into jail, Sapo lunges for Mr. Blessington, who starts choking Sapo. Blanca runs to get another teacher, and Mr. Blessington lunges for Blanca. That's when Sapo bites Mr. Blessington, taking a giant chunk out of his shoulder and spitting the flesh in Mr. Blessington's face. Mr. Blessington passes out.

It's clear that there are many Latinx literary figures that Mr. Blessington could draw on to motivate the predominantly Latinx student body, such as Julia de Burgos, the school's namesake. Instead, he derides Latinx literary figures as irrelevant, which makes the students feel like Latinx people's contributions to U.S. culture don't matter. Mr. Blessington also abuses his power by choking Sapo and lunging for Blanca, which further exposes the oppression that Latinx children face in schools because of racist people like Mr. Blessington. Meanwhile, the reader learns that Sapo does indeed bite people, solidifying his potential connection to Salazar's murder.

Mr. Tapia runs in and tells Sapo to pretend he heard voices, because nobody will believe that Mr. Blessington attacked him. Sapo follows this advice and spends the year seeing a psychiatrist instead of going to Juvenile Hall. Julio recalls that after that year, Sapo drops out and becomes fearless. Sapo stabs people in fights, and he's not afraid to hurt people who want to make him hate himself. Julio reflects that Blanca never forgot the day Sapo bit Mr. Blessington.

Mr. Tapia's response to the situation shows that the immigrant teachers like himself have little power in the school environment, as no one will believe him if he stands up for Sapo. He also exposes how Latinx students can be unfairly criminalized in school environments. This state of affairs makes Sapo lose respect for the school environment and drop out. Quiñonez thus argues that the oppression faced by Latinx immigrant children in schools often forces them into delinquency.

Presently, at breakfast in their apartment, Blanca asks Julio if Sapo killed Salazar. Blanca thinks it's strange that there are no **drug** dealers around their block, and she worries that Julio knows something she doesn't. Julio lies and says Sapo would never do something like that since he's just a petty criminal, but Blanca doesn't buy it. Blanca mentions that Pastor Velasquez is coming to dinner with Claudia next Friday, and she expects Julio to be there. Suddenly, the phone rings: it's Nene, reminding Julio that Vera is arriving tomorrow. Julio decides then and there that this will be the end of his business with Bodega. Just then, the news comes on—the newscaster mentions Salazar, which makes Blanca tense.

When Blanca hears the news about Salazar's murder, she realizes immediately that Sapo was involved: the bite mark on Salazar's shoulder reminds her of the bite that she saw Sapo give Mr. Blessington years ago in school. Julio once again privileges his loyalty to Sapo over his relationship with Blanca, showing that he will not put Sapo at risk, even if it negatively affects his own marriage to a woman he deeply loves.

BOOK 2, ROUND 2: EVERYONE'S A THIEF

On the day that Vera is due to arrive, Julio spots Nazario outside his apartment building. Nazario is smartly dressed and surrounded by tenants who are kissing and greeting him. Julio tells Nazario that he's planning to take Blanca, Negra, and Vera out to dinner so that Bodega can bump into them at the restaurant, as if by accident. Julio thinks to himself that he'll never rat out Sapo or Bodega, but after he's connected Bodega and Vera as promised, he's steering clear of Bodega. Nazario explains that the dinner plan is fine—however, Bodega also wants Julio to take him to meet Vera this morning. Julio is angry. He can tell that Nazario's worried and wants to distract Bodega, but Julio is afraid of getting implicated in the Salazar murder.

Julio is hesitant to get more embroiled with Bodega and Nazario because he doesn't want to get in trouble with the law over the murder and ruin his life. Yet, at the same time, Julio is still adamant that he'll protect Sapo (which would also get Julio in trouble with law). The juxtaposition between Julio's fear of getting in trouble and his determination to protect Sapo shows how strong the sense of loyalty between them is—Julio will even cover for Sapo when it conflicts with his own personal safety.

As they walk down the street, Nazario is greeted warmly by many people. Bodega and Nazario have helped out a lot of Puerto Rican immigrants in the neighborhood, and it shows: the whole neighborhood is loyal to Bodega and nobody forgets his favors. Julio reflects that Bodega's good name has spread "like a good smell from a Latin woman's kitchen." Julio explains that after the Young Lords broke up. Bodega turned to **drug-dealing** and got busted selling marijuana on the street. Nazario represented Bodega and got him off using an ingenious loophole. Now, they run the whole neighborhood.

Quiñonez uses the simile of "a good smell from a Latin woman's kitchen" to represent the positive, healthy, and warm feelings that Bodega and Nazario inspire among the residents by helping them out. They bolster the community and encourage its residents to help one another out. Bodega and Nazario effectively build a feeling of solidarity in the community that spreads swiftly—people are drawn to it the way they're drawn to the aroma of good food.

Julio tells Nazario he can't help out this morning because he has to go to work. When Julio gets to the supermarket, his manager gives Julio a meaningful look, says that Julio looks ill, and tells him to go home. Nazario is waiting for Julio outside. As they walk, Nazario encourages Julio to go to law school, saying that lawyers can steal a lot more than men with guns. Julio retorts that he doesn't like shady business. Nazario explains that everything he's doing with Bodega is for Julio's generation—so they don't have to suffer.

Nazario's quip about lawyers introduces the idea that stealing happens in professional circles as well as on the streets. This is important, as Nazario thinks that his actions (even though some of them are technically illegal) are not much different than the stealing that many people in power do through lawyers, legislation, and paperwork.

Julio and Nazario approach a small storefront, and Julio is surprised to learn that this place is actually a salsa museum. Julio looks at the gold records on the walls with awe while Nazario chats with the owner of the museum—Nazario and Bodega have been putting the owner's daughter through school. Suddenly, Julio sees the big picture: He realizes that Bodega and Nazario are financing promising young Latino people to build a professional class of educated youths who will do big things in the future, live affordably in Bodega's buildings, and empower the whole community. Nazario thinks that the "white yuppies" will take over otherwise, and the neighborhood will be lost. Nazario wants to "free our island, without bloodshed."

In saying "white yuppies," Nazario reveals that a fast-approaching wave of gentrification threatens the local culture of Spanish Harlem, such as the salsa museum. The museum also highlights a significant aspect of Latinx culture, explicitly contradicting the belief among Julio's racist teachers that Latinx people have no culture to offer the world. Nazario's claim about freeing "our island" shows that he feels compelled to claim Spanish Harlem because there isn't any place for Puerto Rican culture to thrive. Even the island is affected by gentrification and oppression as a U.S. territory.

BOOK 2, ROUND 3: THE FISH OF LOISAIDA

Julio arrives at his apartment to find Bodega waiting for him. Bodega's immaculately dressed in a white silk suit, pacing nervously and worrying about every last detail. Julio wants to ask about Salazar but he decides to wait and see how Bodega's encounter with Vera goes first. Julio puts on a suit while Bodega stares dreamily out the window, and they walk out. Nobody notices Bodega on the street the way they noticed Nazario. One man even asks Julio to pass on a message for Bodega through Nazario, not knowing that Bodega is standing right there. Bodega, noticing Julio's confusion, says that anonymity makes him more powerful.

*Quiñonez uses Bodega's almost comical nervousness to show a non-*machismo *version of a man in love. Bodega is vulnerable, distracted, and a bit lost—and he's very concerned about his appearance. This undermines the general depiction of men as godly and powerful and women as vulnerable and lost within the Latinx immigrant community.*

As Julio and Bodega approach the reunion, Bodega panics and tries to turn around. Julio calms Bodega and strokes his ego until Bodega feels confident enough to go in. As they walk in, Bodega is immediately mesmerized by Vera as he gazes at her intensely from afar. Suddenly, Nazario enters. Julio realizes in that moment that Bodega and Nazario must have secretly donated to the school to set this whole reunion up. Julio wonders why they need him at all, until he remembers that "blood is thicker than water." Julio feels like he's been used, and he doesn't like it. He wants to walk out and tell Blanca everything, but he hesitates—she'll want to move out of the apartment if she knows the truth.

It's clear that Bodega and Nazario could have orchestrated a meeting with Vera without Julio's help, yet they still want him involved because he's related to Vera through his marriage to Blanca. The idea that "blood is thicker than water" (that relatives take care of one another) highlights that this community puts a lot of stock in familial loyalty. Once again, Julio feels compelled to confide in his wife but feels like her deeply religious moral rigidity gets in the way of them connecting honestly and openly with each other.


Julio wants to leave, but he agrees to stay if Bodega levels with him. Bodega explains that Salazar was going to expose Bodega for buying property with "dirty money" so that a mobster named Aaron Fischman, known as the Fish of Loisaida, could take over Spanish Harlem. Bodega also explains that Sapo is in hiding and Nazario is working on clearing Sapo's charges. Bodega gives Julio his word that Sapo won't go to prison. Julio knows he should cut and run at this point, but he realizes he's rooting for Bodega. All Julio has to do is tell Vera that he's married to her niece Nancy (Blanca), and that their landlord, William Irazarry (Izzy, to her), is waiting for her in a very expensive car outside.

Julio (and, by extension, the reader) has to weigh up how much criminal activity is justifiable when pursuing noble causes like the empowerment of a community. Now that it's clear that murder is involved, Julio is less confident that Nazario and Bodega are doing the right thing. Yet despite Sapo's obvious involvement in the crime, Julio remains unflinchingly loyal to Sapo. Julio is determined to protect Sapo, even when it comes to matters as serious as murder.


BOOK 2, ROUND 4: A DIAMOND AS BIG AS THE PALLADIUM

Blanca's aunt Vera reinvented herself after leaving Spanish Harlem. She changed her name from Veronica Linda Salvina to Vera and dyes her hair blonde to seem less Puerto Rican. Her Miami friends though she comes from money. Presently, when Julio introduces himself to Vera, he sees how her beauty—like Blanca's—must have caused a stir in the neighborhood when she was young. Julio is about to mention Bodega but notices Vera's face suddenly going pale. Bodega is walking toward them, looking miserable, sweaty, and ill. Vera regains her composure and asks Bodega about the Lords. Bodega simply leads Vera to his fancy car before blurting out that it's not rented. Vera looks impressed and laughs, and Bodega is happy.

Vera's attempts to distance herself from her Latinx roots highlight another component of systemic oppression: internalized racism at play here. Vera has taken to heart the belief that people won't respect her if they see her as a Latinx person, so she tries to mask her Spanish Harlem roots and pass as a rich white person. She changes her appearance to mimic the blonde hair of white people, shortens her name from Veronica Linda to Vera in an effort to sound more Americanized, and makes up a backstory that implies she grew up rich.

Julio, Vera, and Bodega all get into the car and drive to one of Bodega's buildings. He explains that he's in real estate now. Vera's face starts glowing when Bodega says that the buildings aren't his—they're all for her. Bodega also shows Vera a gallery he's bought for the neighborhood. Julio takes this as cue to leave them alone—but Bodega follows Julio out, panicking about being left alone with Vera. Julio urges Bodega to get back in there and tell Vera everything he always wanted to. Then, Julio walks home and falls asleep until he's awoken by a loud knock on the door. It's Vera and Bodega, sloppy and drunk—they want Julio to go to Central Park with them, though he has no intention of going.

In buying the gallery, Bodega shows that part of his plan to empower Spanish Harlem includes providing spaces to celebrate Latinx arts and cultural contributions. Vera's demeanor is calm and controlled, while Bodega is anxious and unsure. Once again, this conflicts with the religious view of women as flustered, insecure people who need men's guidance.


Julio imagines a teenage Bodega and Vera in Central Park talking passionately about freeing Puerto Rico from U.S. control and laying around in love. He also imagines Vera eventually growing tired of Bodega's activist ambitions and asking Bodega to choose between the Young Lords and her. Bodega looks the same tonight—as if he's invincible and can change the world. Vera coos at Bodega about wanting to shoot a gun with her revolutionary. She takes off her giant engagement ring and hands it to Julio, saying that she never wanted it. Bodega tells Julio to keep it—he's going to buy Vera "a diamond as big as the Palladium." They leave their half-drunk champagne on the table and walk off arm in arm, singing drunkenly.

Quiñonez's plot is adapted from F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel The Great Gatsby. Quiñonez pays homage to Fitzgerald here in his use of the phrase "a diamond as big as the Palladium," which is borrowed from Fitzgerald's short story entitled "A Diamond as Big as the Ritz." The allusion informs the reader that the story might not end well for Bodega, given that Gatsby (Bodega's parallel in The Great Gatsby) ends up dead. However, in mentioning Bodega's political dreams, Quiñonez also hints at a silver lining—namely, that Bodega's ideals will survive in the community, even if Bodega himself doesn't.

BOOK 2, ROUND 5: THE WAR WAS IN FULL BLOOM

A few hours later, Julio wakes up to Blanca asking him about the champagne. Julio fills Blanca in, fetches the diamond ring, and offers it to her. Blanca wrestles with her conscience, thinking God will know that it really belongs to the man who bought it. Suddenly, Julio get annoyed. Blanca is always complaining about Julio's sexism and how he undermines her intelligence—yet she still believes in "the most sexist book ever written." Blanca thinks that Julio is a disrespectful sinner when he rolls a joint, yet she's disrespected every week in church—where women are treated as if they're just there to glorify their husbands or pastors.

Quiñonez explicitly shows that Blanca's moral views are directly shaped by the teachings of her church and the Bible. Through Julio's voice, Quiñonez argues that the Bible is actually much more disempowering than Blanca thinks. Julio thinks that the Bible is "sexist" and that Blanca's church sermons undermine her freedom as a woman, because both reduce women to mere accessories in stories centered on the glory of men.

Blanca looks like she's about to throw something at Julio and yells that believing in God doesn't make her weak. Blanca's mother was in charge, fixed the house and paid the bills—and she *still* went to church. Julio snaps back that if Blanca's mother had the chances Blanca had, she could have done a lot more with her life. He thinks Blanca's education is influencing her in ways she doesn't even think about. Blanca worries about people seeing her pregnant belly at graduation and thinking she's intelligent but was dumb to get "knocked up." At church, however, they praise her belly.

Through Julio's argument, Quiñonez suggests that education is much more empowering that religious belief. In school, people think that Blanca's value is rooted in her intelligence. Yet at church, Blanca's value is reduced to her ability to bear children. Julio thinks this latter attitude is regressive, as it could actually hinder Blanca's social and economic empowerment to be burdened with childbearing at such a young age.

Blanca calls Julio out, saying that he's just upset about the ring—but Julio is unfazed. He says that Blanca hates it when Julio keeps her the dark, yet all the men in her Bible do whatever they want without telling their wives. And here Julio is, telling her about the ring, because he knows she's smarter than him. Julio continues in earnest, saying that he wants to include Blanca in things but stops himself because he knows that the things he's involved in contradict the Bible. Suddenly, Julio feels compelled to tell Blanca everything about Salazar and Bodega, but he knows she'd send Sapo to jail. Instead, Julio asks Blanca why his atheism should affect her status in church. Blanca retorts that she hates Julio's preachy moods and changes the subject to Negra.

Quiñonez also suggests that the Bible offers regressive stereotypes of women as passive background characters who don't do anything productive for themselves. Similarly, Blanca's church community denigrates her for having an atheist husband, which implies that her value as a woman is determined by her husband's beliefs, not her own. Julio also suggests that Blanca's religious beliefs prevent them from bonding as a couple, since he can't confide in her about things that conflict with her religious views.

Blanca tells Julio that Negra is in the hospital— Victor beat her up. Negra wants Julio to have Bodega take care of Victor. Calmly, Blanca says she knows now that Bodega owes Julio, and she wants to know what's going on. She says this isn't about church, or God, or sexism—it's about Julio hiding things from her. Julio throws up his hands and explains that Bodega is the man whom Blanca's aunt Vera wants to marry. If Blanca wants to, she can ask Bodega herself. Julio knows that Blanca will leave him if she knows the whole truth, so he's banking on Bodega deflecting as well, so that this whole thing buries itself. The mood is tense, and Julio leaves for class, feeling frustrated with everyone.

Blanca has caught on that although Julio means what he says, he is also conveniently deflecting—he's using his rant about religion to dodge Blanca's question about what's going on. This shows just how emotionally intelligent Blanca really is. Quiñonez thus shows that Blanca's own behavior also departs from biblical depictions of women as passive characters who aren't able to figure out how to live unless men tell them what to do.

After class, Julio looks around the neighborhood for Sapo's car without any luck. Julio wants to visit Negra to find out what she knows, but hospital visiting hours are over. If Negra tells Blanca anything, Sapo will be in trouble. Julio decides to stop by the church, hoping to smooth things over with Blanca. As Julio enters the packed church, people smile as if they're saving him. Julio finds Blanca; she smiles and grabs Julio's hand. She continues listening intently to the sermon alongside her friend Claudia.

In between juggling school and his tense relationship, Julio still prioritizes doing whatever he can to protect Sapo from jail, once again stressing the fierce solidarity between them. This kind of fiercely protective loyalty embodies what Bodega wants to encourage more broadly in the Latinx community, because it enables people to protect one another against a corrupt system and band together to improve one another's lives.

Roberto Vega (a 17-year-old who's getting anointed) gives a long and passionate sermon in Spanish about a slave girl who keeps being saved by kings and various saints but acts like a whore every time there isn't a man around to save her. The crowd yells, "Alleluia!" every time Vega says, "A whore!" Vega points to Claudia and yells that she was a prostitute before, but Christ saved her. Claudia swoons before Vega points out another girl. Julio notices that Blanca isn't hysterical: her eyes are glowing, and she looks enlightened. Julio wishes he could believe like that, but he can't—he just thinks about how sweaty his hand is becoming in Blanca's grasp.

Roberto Vega's sermon comically reinforces everything Julio dislikes about church. Roberto describes all women (both in the Bible and in the congregation) as promiscuous sinners who are unable to find their way in the world without a man to guide them. This implies that women serve no other purpose other than to make men look good by saving them, just as Julio suggested earlier. Despite the clear sexism of Vega's sermon, the women in the congregation completely buy into it.

Roberto Vega proclaims that Christ will not turn his back on the congregation, and everyone bursts into dance and song. Julio thinks about all the religious murals in Spanish Harlem. Julio imagines Christ nailed on a cross that connects Spanish Harlem, Miami, and Puerto Rico. He thinks about the congregation waiting for Christ to come down to the projects and take them all to the big "penthouse in the sky." Until then, he muses, they'll have to wait in their rat-infested apartments. After the service is over, Blanca and Julio make up. Roberto Vega parades around the church "like the Lord's stud," and Claudia swoons again.

Quiñonez argues here that religious belief is also regressive because it motivates people to wait for rewards in an afterlife (such as a "penthouse in the sky") rather than to push for social change and better conditions in their current lives. Quiñonez thus argues that religious devotion in the Latinx community effectively keeps people poor. In describing Vega as "the Lord's stud," Quiñonez implies that Vega's sermon is just another version of machismo posturing, which also holds back the Latinx community by oppressing women.

Blanca invites Roberto Vega's family to dinner on Friday, along with Pastor Vasquez, who earned his reputation preaching about the church saving him from a life of petty crime. Blanca's scheming for a match between the teenage Roberto and Claudia, even though Claudia's almost 30. Without thinking, Julio quips that Claudia is over the hill for a Latina, and he's surprised when Blanca agrees. She feels terrible that Claudia is teased at church, and she thinks Roberto—despite his heartthrob status—is mature and good enough to save Claudia. Julio laughs in ridicule, but Blanca is too happy to notice.

Claudia's low status in the church community reinforces the idea that such people mostly value women for their childbearing ability. As a woman who's almost 30, Claudia has fewer childbearing years left than younger women, which diminishes her status. Despite his openly anti-sexist stance, Julio's thoughtless quip about Claudia's age shows that this sort of sexism also exists within the non-religious community.

As Julio and Blanca approach their building, they realize it's on fire: they see sirens, fire engines, and people running out of fire escapes. Blanca grasps her belly and starts shaking, relieved that they were all at the church and not at home. Luckily, nobody is hurt. Suddenly, a man emerges from the shadows: it's Nazario. Julio pretends that he doesn't know him, but as their eyes lock, Julio knows what happened: Aaron Fischman set the fire as revenge for Salazar's death. Julio knows that there's a war on now.

The fire in Julio and Blanca's building is a visceral reminder of the violence that plagues the community. Blanca's distressed reaction represents the emotional toll that living in such a violent, unstable environment can take on Spanish Harlem's residents. Aaron Fischman's involvement shows that the neighborhood is vulnerable to criminal activity from all over New York, and it reminds the reader that the police don't do much to help people in this neighborhood.

BOOK 2, ROUND 6: AFTER THE FIRE

The fire has been put out, and Julio and Blanca are in their apartment, trying to salvage what's left of their stuff. Blanca's church community chips in to help. Luckily, Julio spots Vera's ring and pockets it, as well as the envelope he's been hiding for Sapo. Nazario gathers the tenants and gives an inspiring speech about "Latin pride, a sense of community, and trust." Nazario recalls fires on Puerto Rico, where the most important help comes from neighbors rather than the government. He jokes about how Latino people are so tough that even his cat was tough, and he promises that Bodega will shelter them again, as he did before—within a month.

Despite denigrating Blanca's church community, Julio admires their solidarity toward one another, seeing it as a strong redeeming quality. Similarly, Nazario emphasizes why a strong sense of solidarity is important among the disenfranchised Latinx community more generally. Since they have few public resources available to them, they need to rely on one another. Nazario suggests that Puerto Rico (a U.S. territory) also lacks government support, meaning that the U.S. government treats Puerto Rico as poorly as local politicians treat Spanish Harlem.

Nazario, pretending not to know Julio, promises that Bodega will shelter pregnant women like Blanca first, starting tomorrow. Blanca doesn't buy the emotional charade, and she knows something's up as Nazario circulates through the crowd. By the time Julio and Nazario get a chance to speak alone, Julio is out for blood—Fischman could have killed Blanca. Nazario wants Julio to come to Queens with him tomorrow, but he won't say more. Julio nods. He knows that the media and the fire department won't care much about the fire, but he worries about the trouble that Fischman will cause for Bodega (who's currently off somewhere with Vera.

Blanca's sharp emotional intelligence shines once more (she intuitively knows that Nazario is not telling the whole truth). She thus embodies a stark contrast with Vega's depiction of women as clueless in his sermon. Meanwhile, Julio reveals more about the oppression his community faces: local law enforcers tend to ignore the neighborhood. Additionally, and the media only reports events involving violence, thereby reinforcing the stereotype that the Latinx community is violent.


BOOK 2, ROUND 7: WATERING HIS PEACH TREE

The next day, Blanca and Julio move into their new apartment, two buildings down from their old one. Blanca is too stressed and tired to ask questions, which relieves Julio. As Julio is hauling a rug into the building, he hears Sapo's voice cracking a joke about Julio being homeless. Julio is happy to see Sapo. Julio doesn't want to leave while he's in the middle of moving, but Sapo insists. Julio leaves with Sapo to meet Nazario, feeling guilty about leaving the church community hauling his stuff up to the apartment without him.

Once again, Quiñonez highlights the deep sense of solidarity among the church community, who help Blanca and Julio move even when Julio disappears with Sapo. Julio's loyalty to Sapo persists despite his guilty feelings, showing that, as always, he'll prioritize people to whom he owes a bond of loyalty—even if it makes him look bad to others.

In the car, Julio asks Sapo if he killed Salazar. Sapo denies it but finally admits that he did bite Salazar—he just didn't kill him. Julio needles Sapo for information but stops when Sapo shoots him a warning look. They arrive at an abandoned building fronted by a fake candy store. The men inside greet Sapo warmly, and Julio watches some men joke about the difference between sleeping with white girls and Latin girls as Sapo exchanges some packages. Sapo thinks that Julio likes Blanca because she's a "white Spanish." Julio and Sapo bicker about this on the drive to meet Nazario.

The boys' familiarity with spaces that are fronts for illegal activity highlights that there's a lot of crime in disenfranchised areas of New York. Meanwhile, the sexist jokes among Sapo's crew imply once more that sexism is a widespread issue in this community. Sapo's claim that Julio likes Blanca for embodying characteristics of a "white Spanish" person exposes how Latinx people can internalize negative beliefs about their own ethnicity under conditions of oppression.

Nazario and Julio drive to Queens and meet a man named Mr. Cavalleri. Nazario tells Mr. Cavalleri that Bodega's beef is with Aaron Fischman, and that Bodega will compensate Mr. Cavalleri for any fallout that might affect him—especially since Mr. Cavalleri runs the Italian section of East Harlem. Mr. Cavalleri thinks that Bodega is a strange man—he sells **drugs** yet runs community rehab centers from the same buildings. The atmosphere is a little tense, but in the end, Mr. Cavalleri says that he has no business with Fischman. He tells the men that it was wise for them to visit him, and that if Bodega wins the turf war, Mr. Cavalleri will remember Bodega's name.

The meeting with Mr. Cavalleri implies that a lot of New York's property market is likely run by the criminal underground. There's a subtle implication here that perhaps even the city's officials get their hands dirty and engage with people like Mr. Cavalleri when securing their own wealth, especially if it involves New York's property market. This reinforces Nazario's belief that everybody who acquires wealth dabbles in questionable activity, which he'll articulate next.

BOOK 2, ROUND 8: AS LONG AS LATINO KILLS LATINO WE'LL ALWAYS BE A LITTLE PEOPLE

On the ride back to Manhattan, Nazario is relieved that one hurdle—appeasing Mr. Cavalleri—is out of the way. But he's still stressed. Bodega is off with Vera and isn't answering his phone. Julio is confused about why he's there, but Nazario says Julio can be an asset to the Latin community—they want to support him through whatever means they have, even if those means involve crime. Nazario thinks that people who gained wealth did it by killing their part of the world, and they have to fight back. One day, he speculates, the Latino people will be able to steal just by signing papers, just like white men. Nazario says that even the United States took "shady steps" to become powerful: they stole all the land they claimed.

Nazario makes the case that his actions are no worse than those of elite people around the world. He argues that white Americans acquired their wealth by exploiting the Latinx community and plundering their lands, which is no less criminal than what he's doing. The only difference to Nazario is that the elite hide their "shady" crimes behind contracts and legislation while the disenfranchised don't have that luxury. Nazario thus believes that his own actions aren't any more immoral than those of the elite.

Julio reflects that, like Bodega and Nazario, he, too, has always just wanted to live a better life beyond petty street crime. Julio is pursuing school and work while saving to buy a house. He realizes that although his path is legal, there's still no guarantee of success. Nazario and Bodega, however, are talking about evolution: turning trash into gold. Julio realizes that some people will get hurt and become "extinct" because they can't adapt to change. Their plan makes sense to Julio, but he so does his own, and he's confused about which path to pursue. Nazario reflects that media interest in the Salazar murder is dwindling, so he thinks that problem will be buried soon.

Julio has previously been skeptical about Bodega and Nazario's actions because they utilize criminal means to realize their aims. Now, he's starting to change his mind and embrace what they do. Julio's moral qualms are starting to disappear. He implicitly decides here that Bodega and Nazario are not wrong if they are doing what they do for a worthy cause (namely, the empowerment of their community).

As they approach Manhattan, Julio thinks that its majestic skyscrapers make it look like Camelot or Eldorado. But he knows the buildings hide a secret: Spanish Harlem, a slum handed down like used clothing between different immigrant communities, full of crime and kindness. It doesn't seem to belong, but it's there, full of broken promises chased by Latino people searching for a better life in "God's country." Julio reflects that they'll never find God in Spanish Harlem, because God lives in the suburbs "like all slumlords."

Through Julio's eyes, Quiñonez reflects on the vast wealth discrepancies in New York. Spanish Harlem's presence among such wealth shows that New York's elite exploit immigrant communities (particularly for cheap labor) to maintain their own wealth. Julio also implies that "God" (meaning whoever runs the church) is also a kind of "slumlord" who exploits Latinx people. This is because the religious elite profit from people who tolerate their poverty, wait for salvation, and funnel money into the church instead of fighting for their own empowerment.


Julio pictures explorers arriving to Manhattan, striking deals with Native Americans, and buying Manhattan for a bargain $24. He realizes that Bodega and Nazario are simply doing the same thing: buying a run-down and abandoned bit of the island back at a bargain rate so that they can rejuvenate Spanish Harlem. Then, Bodega and Nazario will watch as others realize that they missed out on something beautiful.

Quiñonez argues that New York's current elite acquired their wealth through crimes like swindling and killing Native Americans and stealing their land. He argues (through Julio's eyes) that Bodega and Nazario are doing the exact same thing: they're swindling the city to take back what was taken from indigenous people in the early days of U.S. history.

Julio arrives home, fearing Blanca's wrath. Luckily, she's distracted because Roberto Vega and Claudia are there. They've been secretly seeing each other, and they want to elope and start a new life in Chicago with Roberto's brother Googie. Julio is glad that Roberto is thinking practically, but Blanca is worried that their elopement will upset the church community. She urges Roberto to come clean to his mother. Julio thinks about lying to Blanca and feels guilty. It turns out that Roberto's mother sent Googie to Chicago after Googie became a junkie in order to protect Roberto. Julio, Blanco, and Claudia convince Roberto to talk to his mother. After Roberto and Claudia leave, Blanca's exhausted. She heads to her mother's to study, leaving Julio relieved that Blanca bring up his absence.

The back-and-forth debate about whether or not Roberto should inform his mother about his plans to run away to Chicago with Claudia shows that familial bonds of loyalty run deep in the Latinx community. These bonds often motivate people's actions, even when they causes personal distress (like being separated from a child, as Roberto's mother was), or when they conflicts with personal romantic goals (like Roberto and Claudia's elopement or Julio and Blanca's relationship).

Sapo stops by and drives Julio to a block of condemned buildings that Bodega renovated. Julio thinks that Bodega is improving the city much faster than city officials do—they spend decades deciding whether to renovate or bulldoze condemned buildings.Bodega is meeting Vera's husband tomorrow so that Vera can officially end things with him. Julio wonders why Vera is putting Bodega at risk of an altercation with her husband when they could just run off. Bodega ignores Julio's concerns and says that he wants to build a school for immigrant children when this is all over. Julio agrees distractedly, wondering if Nene was the one who killed Salazar. Julio decides that Bodega did what he had to: nobody else is going to help Spanish Harlem.

Despite the murder weighing on his mind, Julio ultimately decides that Bodega is justified in his actions—even in having Salazar killed—because Bodega is trying to improve the lives of countless other people. Julio also thinks that Bodega is justified in his actions because the city doesn't prioritize issues like affordable housing for immigrants. This means that without Bodega, the Latinx community would have nobody fighting in their corner. Julio also rightly suspects that Vera is manipulating Bodega, and that she might not have his best interests at heart.


BOOK 2, ROUND 9: I LIKED THE WAY YOU STOOD UP FOR US

The next day, Julio arrives home from work to find Blanca and Pastor Vasquez sitting on the couch surrounded by unpacked moving boxes. Blanca wants Pastor Vasquez to talk to Julio to deter him from keeping company with quasi-criminals like Bodega. Pastor Vasquez launches into a lecture about the Bible saving him from crime and **drugs**, and Julio feels annoyed. Suddenly, the doorbell rings: two detectives named DeJesus and Ortiz want to come in. Julio is about to say no because he doesn't trust police, but Blanca welcomes them in. The detectives have some questions about Salazar's murder; they ask Julio if he knows Sapo. Julio deflects, saying he knew Sapo in junior high but they barely see each other these days.

Julio has already decided that Bodega is justified in doing what he must to empower the Latinx community. Here, Julio dismisses Blanca and Pastor Vasquez's Bible-based views about Bodega as simplistic, naïve, and out-of-touch. Julio's visceral mistrust of the police implies that they likely don't treat people from Spanish Harlem well, reinforcing the idea that systemic institutions (like the police force) oppress the community. Julio's loyalty to Sapo remains strong, even though he risks being arrested himself.

Julio gestures to Pastor Vasquez and tells the police he's in the middle of Bible study. Blanca is fuming in the background. The detectives ask Julio to come to the station to look over some evidence. Blanca starts angrily packing a bag to head to her mother's, saying that when she's back tomorrow, she needs to have a serious talk with Julio. Julio doesn't know who to be more worried about: the police or Blanca.

Blanca implies that she might be leaving Julio, and it's clear that Julio's worried—but not worried enough to rat out Sapo. It seems that no matter what the cost, Julio's sense of solidarity with Sapo (and likely, by this stage, with Bodega's cause) remains unshakable.

At the station, Julio is waiting to meet Captain Leary (who's running the investigation). Julio asks DeJesus to tell him—out of courtesy between fellow Latino people—how long this will take. DeJesus gets angry says he's Cuban, not Puerto Rican, and he hates people from that "monkey island." Julio gets angry as well, and he retorts that DeJesus is from a "monkey island" himself. Ortiz steps between them to ease the tension.

The argument between Julio and DeJesus exposes another damaging effect of systemic oppression: internalized racist views about Latinx people (captured in the "monkey island" slur) divide people who actually have a lot in common. One of the reasons why Bodega wants to encourage loyalty in the community is to help people bond over their shared oppression as Latinx people, so they can feel united rather than divided and work together to fight for change.

Captain Leary walks in, looking bored, and asks Julio what he knows about the Harry Goldstein Real Estate Agency, Bodega, or Salazar. Julio says that he pays rent to the agency and doesn't know anything else. DeJesus gets irate, saying that he knows Julio is lying, but Captain Leary just warns Julio to be careful in the future—they've got their eye on him. As Julio leaves, Ortiz pulls him aside and says he's Puerto Rican too. He has to stay loyal to DeJesus but likes the way Julio stood up to him.

Captain Leary's boredom shows that he's not taking the case seriously. Although that's lucky for Julio, it nonetheless exposes how little the police care about crime in Spanish Harlem. Ortiz displays the kind of ethnic solidarity that Bodega is trying to inspire among Latinx people. Quiñonez thus shows how important this kind of in-group loyal can be by contrasting DeJesus's hatred and desire to incriminate Julio with Ortiz's empathy and measured response.

BOOK 2, ROUND 10: THE SADDEST PART IS TURNING OFF THE LIGHTS

Julio arrives home from the police station shaking with fear that Blanca won't return. He calls her, and she picks up and says that she can't stay mad at him. Julio promises to never lie again, but Blanca says it's too late—she's staying with her mother until the baby is born. Blanca hangs up, and the apartment suddenly feels empty and dark. Negra calls next, reminding Julio that she wants to have Victor beaten up. Julio is annoyed. He wants to keep the line free in case Blanca calls, but she doesn't. Julio tosses and turns but can't sleep: he's scared, and he misses Blanca.

Julio's growing loyalty to Bodega (and his ongoing loyalty to Sapo) is starting to unravel his marriage, and he is feeling the loss that his actions have caused. Quiñonez also implies that social activism (like Bodega's plans for improving Spanish Harlem) are not easy to accomplish in a corrupt society because they involve taking personal risks—which can involve painful personal losses.

BOOK 2, ROUND 11: WORTH ALL THE SOULS IN HELL

The next day, Julio goes to work, welcoming the distraction; he wants to cry when he thinks about Blanca. After work, Julio walks around to try and ease his sadness, and he bumps into Sapo. Sapo is proud of Julio for not cracking and spilling the beans to the police. Julio wants to distance himself from the situation, but Sapo takes him to meet Vera's husband, John Vidal, whom Bodega and Vera are about to confront. Reluctantly, Julio introduces himself to Vidal, who seems "more American than Mickey Mouse" despite being a Latino. They sit and wait for Bodega, and Julio's thoughts wander to Blanca: he wonders how he got embroiled in this mess, and he just wants her back. Eventually, Bodega and Vera walk in.

Quiñonez highlights that Sapo appreciates and respects Julio for his actions (like protecting him when talking to the police), reinforcing the idea that integrity and honoring the bonds of loyalty are closely intertwined in the Spanish Harlem community. Quiñonez's phrase "more American than Mickey Mouse" shows that Vidal (like Vera) is a person who has internalized the racism he experienced and therefore believes what his oppressors think: that Latinx culture is inferior. So, he tries to hide or mask his Latinx identity, believing that looking white will make his life better.

Vera's manages to blurt out that she's leaving Vidal. She continues, cruelly saying that Vidal is old and doesn't perform well in bed. Vidal gets angry and says that this is just one another one of Vera's many affairs. At this, Bodega loses his temper and starts fighting with Vidal. Suddenly, Vera panics and shoots Vidal. He slumps to the floor, dead. Vera grows hysterical and begs Bodega to save her from prison. Without hesitation, Bodega calls Nazario—Bodega is going to take the blame for Vera. Julio thinks that Bodega is lost, but he numbly agrees to the plan. Bodega ushers Vera away, looks back, and tells Julio that he's like a brother to him. It's the last time Julio sees Bodega, because the next day, Bodega is dead.

Vera shooting Vidal is not part of Bodega's plan, and Bodega has to act in the moment to remedy the situation. His loyalty to Vera is unwavering—he's even willing to imprison himself for the rest of his life to protect her. Bodega similarly expresses a strong bond of loyalty to Julio when he turns around and calls Julio his brother as he walks away. With this, Quiñonez reinforces that Bodega values loyalty above else—even when it comes at a deep personal cost.

BOOK 2, ROUND 12: KNOCKOUT: THE WAY A HERO SANDWICH DIES IN THE GARMENT DISTRICT AT TWELVE O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON

The next day, Spanish Harlem is crammed with police cars and reporters. Detectives Ortiz and DeJesus pound on Julio's door. Ortiz swiftly tells Julio that he's not under arrest, but that Bodega has been shot and killed. Julio's stomach turns, and he follows the detectives out. There are police with guns on every corner of Spanish Harlem. When they get to the station, Nazario is there; he pulls Julio aside, telling him to say that he wasn't at the restaurant. Julio follows Nazario's instructions, and a bored Captain Leary says that Julio is free to go. He and Nazario silently walk outside. Vera is waiting for them, and they all drive off together.

The police presence in Spanish Harlem is suddenly very high: there are more police than people on the streets. Here, Quiñonez highlights another facet of systemic oppression. There's an intimidating police presence when something violent happens in the neighborhood, but there's not much interest in facilitating actual justice (or getting to the truth of the matter), as Captain Leary's bored demeanor indicates.

Nazario explains that Fischman shot Bodega. Nazario told the police that Bodega shot Salazar and Vidal in order to tie up all the loose ends. Julio knows that he won't get the full story until he talks to Sapo, so he stays quiet. He knows that Nazario is doing what Bodega would have wanted, because this version of the story protects Julio, Sapo, and Vera.

It seems that Bodega would be happy with Nazario's story because it looks like a show of solidarity: it protects the other people from the community who are involved with this situation from further harm or suspicion, thus honoring Bodega's loyalty to them.

Later that day, Negra knocks on Julio's door. Julio is too sad to answer between Bodega's death and Blanca's absence. A few minutes later, Negra climbs in through the fire escape window, complaining about Victor. Just then, the doorbell rings: it's Blanca. She asks Julio if he's alright, knowing that Bodega died. Julio starts to lie but comes clean, saying he's sad and disappointed—he thought Bodega could really change the neighborhood. Blanca says that she understands. Then, she tells Julio that Vera used to mess around with a lot of the boys in the neighborhood, and the man Vera really loved wasn't Bodega—it was Nazario. Suddenly, Julio's blood runs cold.

Julio learns that Vera was actually in love with Nazario all along. They likely orchestrated this plan to get rid of Bodega and claim all the property that Bodega owns for themselves. By setting this plot twist into motion, Meanwhile, Quiñonez provides further insight about the value of Bodega's attempts to foster solidarity in the community, even though he dies before realizing his plan. Already, as is evident here, both Julio and Blanca acknowledge that Bodega meant to do good things for the people of Spanish Harlem. This shared understanding helps to mollify both their attitudes and make way for a reconciliation.

BOOK 3, EULOGY: PA'LANTE, SIEMPRE PA'LANTE

Julio thinks that Bodega probably had no idea about the truth until the moment Nazario shot him; Julio imagines Bodega's heart breaking in that moment. Piecing things together, Julio realizes that Vera just wanted her husband dead, and she knew that Bodega would take the blame for her. Julio searches for Sapo, who suggests that Julio paint a mural for Bodega, like he used to do as a kid for people who died. With Bodega dead, Sapo needs to lay low for a while. Before leaving, Sapo hugs Julio and says that Julio is his only friend. Julio wonders who's going to take Bodega's empire when the dust clears—his money is on Sapo.

Through Julio's bitter reimagination of the last moments of Bodega's life, Quiñonez implies that Nazario's betrayal—the opposite of loyalty—breaks Bodega's heart, once again emphasizing how deeply Bodega values the bonds of loyalty between people. Sapo explicitly honors his friendship with Julio, who remains unflinchingly loyal to Sapo (even though it looks like he's going to get even more entrenched in the criminal underworld).

Julio knows that Nazario will be after him, because he knows everything, so he has to call Ortiz and DeJesus and tell them everything, even though he hates the police. Julio wishes the neighborhood could just punish Nazario and Vera instead, but nobody seems up in arms about Bodega's death. Nonetheless, the whole neighborhood shows up for Bodega's funeral: the line of people waiting to pay their respects stretches across the neighborhood. Everybody is talking about some way that Bodega helped them, with school, rent, or a job. The wake lasts three days.

Julio's visceral distaste for getting the police involved indicates that people in his community really don't trust law enforcement. This reinforces the idea that the community is systemically oppressed: the police likely haven't been treated the community fairly the past, so people like Julio don't trust them. Although Julio is underwhelmed by the neighborhood's response to Bodega's death, Quiñonez shows that people are bonding over the help that Bodega provided them. It creates a sense of shared empathy and bourgeoning solidarity between them, just as Bodega hoped.

Nazario and Vera show up for Bodega's burial. After Nazario lowers the coffin into the grave, Julio approaches him and tells him that he knows the truth. Nazario's eyes narrow—he explains that killing Bodega was the best solution for everybody and that it's better for the neighborhood. Julio calls Nazario a traitor, and Nazario looks like he wants to kill Julio. Suddenly, Ortiz and DeJesus approach from behind and grab Nazario, leading him to a squad car. The police also arrest Vera and Nene, who's sad and confused. Nazario, unfazed, shouts back to Julio to tell Sapo to get in touch when Sapo takes over.

Even though Nazario's secret plan unravels when Julio rats him out to the police, Nazario is relatively unfazed. Nazario remains resolutely committed to his belief that wealth is acquired by engaging in some sort of crime. Since Sapo is likely going to take over Bodega's criminal empire, Nazario wants to align with Sapo to better his own chances of acquiring wealth, even though he'd be doing so from prison.

On the way home, Julio realizes that Nazario must have set fire to his apartment building to make everyone think that Fischman was involved. Nazario set the whole thing up to seize control of everything for himself and Vera. Suddenly, an old man named Geran, who's carrying suitcases, and a young boy named Hipolito approach Julio. Geran explains that he's new in town and is looking for Bodega. Julio shakes his head sadly but offers to house the old man until he gets on his feet. Geran is grateful—he even thinks that Julio might actually be Bodega.

Julio's act of kindness in hosting Geran and Hipolito shows that Bodega's ideals (for the community to take care of one another and grow stronger together) had an effect on Julio after all, despite Julio's skepticism throughout the story. In thinking that Julio might even be the infamous Bodega, Geran reinforces the idea that Bodega's ideals didn't die with him: they live on through the people he helped, like Julio.

That night, Julio has a vivid dream in which a young Bodega—dressed as a Young Lord—leads Julio to the window. Outside, people are playing salsa music, laughing, chatting, and playing dominoes. The neighborhood is covered with graffiti and murals paying homage to Bodega. Julio realizes that Bodega shone a light on the neighborhood and opened the door to endless possibilities. Julio knows that everybody in Spanish Harlem will wake up in the morning with hope in their hearts for a better future.

Quiñonez concludes the story by building on the feeling of solidarity he's been establishing. Julio's dream shows that Bodega does *have a lasting effect on the community after all: he showed them that change is possible, and it begins with looking after one another. This breeds a feeling of solidarity that can empower residents of Spanish Harlem to band together and keep the fight for progress going.*

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