



# Curriculum Connections

## *GO*

By Kazuki Kaneshiro

Translated by Takami Nieda

**Amazon Crossing, 2018**

**Fiction, Set in Japan**

**2018 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / High School Literature**

### ***GO* and *Romeo and Juliet* as companion texts**

The author Kaneshiro (pronounced: "kah-NAY-SHE-row") invites the reader into Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with his epigraph, from Act 2, scene 2 of the play ("What's in a Name?"); a few pages into the novel, Sugihara (pronounced: "sue-GHEE-HA-ra") compares the "feuding Montagues and Capulets" to "North and South Korea" and asks, "You know how Romeo and Juliet ended, right?" (pg. 3). For most students and adults, the names Romeo and Juliet evoke passionate, first-time love, love at first sight. Sugihara asks us to remember that there was more to the story of Romeo and Juliet: the violent feud between the wealthy families of Verona and the double suicide foretold in the prologue to Act I.

### **Violence**

In *Romeo and Juliet* and *GO*, violence is woven into the culture of the backgrounds of the characters. Violent acts create crucial plot developments and allow readers to consider the role of violence thematically. Violence frames so many important scenes in *Romeo and Juliet*, starting with Capulet's servants taunting Montague's servants ("Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?", Shakespeare, 1.1.59) and Old Caplet and Montague comically wanting to get into the fray. Later, in Act III, Mercutio fights with Tybalt to defend his friend's honor, and Romeo kills Tybalt to avenge his friend Mercutio. Violence is necessary, expected, and especially when it comes to family loyalty and friendships, honorable.





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Kaneshiro's depictions of violence highlight Sugihara's constant need to defend himself as he navigates the challenges of his life on the fringes as Zainichi (pronounced: "za-E-KNEE-chee"). An outsider from mainstream Japanese ethnicity, he feels free to make his own rules about use of violence: "Like Malcolm X said, 'I don't call it violence when it's self-defense'" (pg.12). In a classroom brawl Sugihara fights dirty, using an ashtray to smash a kid in the face; yet, in an act of compassion, offers the trembling kid a treatment for his wounds. Sugihara tells the reader, "In every altercation so far, not one of my challengers had made the first move" (pg.10). The best and most brutal fighter in the school, Sugihara must constantly defend his 23-0 fighting record.

When a troublemaker at a club party calls Sugihara "Chon. The nasty Japanese word for a Korean" (pg.89), Sugihara "drilled him in the face dead center with a straight punch" (pg.90). The kid, Kobayashi (pronounced: "koh-BYE-YAH-she"), has a butterfly knife which Sugihara says would make stabbing him self-defense: "If you bring a knife to a fight, you're asking to get cut by one" (pg.90).

Perhaps the most brutal and bloody scenes of violence are between Sugihara and his father, who trained his son in fighting and boxing techniques, giving him a way to defend himself and channel his anger. Sugihara both desires and dreads defeating his father. Jeong-il (pronounced: "jong eel"), Sugihara's best friend, points out that Korea is a Confucian country; vanquishing the father would show Sugihara's lack of proper filial piety. The father ends up being Sugihara's only defeat. These beatings are bloody and savage, more so than Sugihara's fights with his challengers. In Sugihara's last fight with his father, he recognizes that he can't beat his old man, and he literally can't get his blood out of him (Roh). He can change his name, but not his identity.

Both father and son suffer as a result of the formal and informal discriminatory practices of the Japanese against ethnic Koreans. Sugihara is an adept and eager fighter who eventually sees the limitations of violent acts in a culture that fails to accept him. Like his name, violence is a mask, a strategy to cloak his disappointment in a culture and country that fails to accept him.



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### Love at First Sight

“My only love sprung from my only hate” (Shakespeare, 1.5)

Romeo is the Petrarchan lover, long suffering, seeking a woman who is out of reach. Juliet is a Capulet, he’s a Montague; their families are enemies. This doesn’t stop them from marrying in secret thus creating their tragic fall. Likewise, Sugihara is Petrarchan: Sakurai (pronounced: “sah-KOO-RYE”) is fully Japanese, and not on the menu of approachable, acceptable women in Japan. Sugihara is well aware of this and conceals his name and background from Sakurai.

Romantically and sexually, Sugihara is a gentleman. He tells Sakurai about his ethnicity before they could have sex. Sugihara’s acceptance of himself and his identity is “predicated on the romantic acceptance by a “native” female character.” She reveals her first name, Tsubaki (pronounced: “sue-BAH-key”), and he reveals his Zainichi identity (Roh). Kaneshiro doesn’t let the two consummate, unlike Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, who consummate their marriage right before Romeo begins his banishment to Mantua. Sakurai may represent a conquering achievement for Sugihara; if he sleeps with a prototypical Japanese girl, he has properly assimilated into Japanese society. Perhaps Kaneshiro is showing us that this match isn’t right, the hero needs to keep searching for both an appropriate mate and his appropriate mate and his identity (Roh).

Kaneshiro uses two of Shakespeare’s techniques from *Romeo and Juliet*: love at first sight and the imagery of light. At Capulet’s party the lovers see each other at the same time, across a crowded room. Romeo talks of her beauty in terms of lights and darks:

“O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!  
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night  
As a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear—” (Shakespeare, 1.5)

“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the East, and Juliet is the sun.” (Shakespeare 2.2)

Romeo talks of her beauty in terms of light: torches, brightness, jewels, sun. Their



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attraction is physical beauty, as it is with Kaneshiro's characters. At the party at Z, Sugihara sees "A guy with long black hair and an earring dangling from one ear" (pg. 22) who walks up to Sakurai. After a few moments, while seated at a table, "The light in her eyes seemed to dim a little" (pg. 22). Approaching his table, "Her eyes brightened again....I kept glaring at her." And finally, as she sits, Sakurai skirt blew up "...giving me a glimpse of her thighs and panties. Both white" (pg. 23). Juliet and Sakurai are brightness and shine, blocking out the darkness around them.

### **Negotiating Touch**

A comparison of first touches between the lovers reveals more parallel moments between the texts. First touch is hands, then lips:

Romeo (taking Juliet's hand):

"If I profane with my unworhiest hand  
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this  
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss."

Juliet:

"You kiss by th' book."  
(Shakespeare, 1.5)

Romeo reaches out for hands, then asks for lips as well.

In *GO*, it is Sakurai who reaches out for the first touch, "After seeing me nod, she put her hands over the backs of mine resting on the table...Her forefingers slid gently over the backs of my hands" (pg.24). Later, "she...pressed her lips against mine. What soft lips" (pg.31).

### **What's in a Name?**

On her balcony Juliet says, "What's in a name?" and reveals that she loves Romeo and that if they both "refuse their names" their love would be possible. The space for this



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love that they create on Juliet's balcony can't be sustained because they are bound by birth to their families.

At their first meeting, Sakurai keeps her first name a secret, "I don't want to say. I hate my first name." Sugihara replies, "We don't need to bother with names" (pg.30). Both have reasons for keeping their names secret, which they reveal later in the story. Sakurai conceals her first name in order to hide her too potent Japanese identity: "My given name is Tsubaki. A name that has the kanji characters for cherry blossom and camellia sounds so Japanese that I didn't want you to know." Sugihara, conceals his name to keep his Korean heritage a secret, but reveals it right before he and Sakurai consummate their relationship: "My real name is Lee. Like Bruce Lee" (pg. 121).

Sakurai has a visceral reaction to Sugihara's truth; her rejection not only reveals her prejudice, but also represents yet another way that Sugihara is rendered outside conventional Japanese cultural identity. He's unable to achieve the sexual conquest of a "real" Japanese woman (Roh). By denying their names, the two can exist in a third space, neither Japanese nor Korean; but knowing their true identities exposes the prejudice Sakurai has for Zainichi Koreans. They are forced to grow and change and accept each other, or not. In the last words of the novel, Sakurai says with "white as snow breath": "Let's go"; the two seem to choose to stay together and confront the difficulties of their love.

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