Bob Kaufman: Life According to the Beat

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Abstract

Paradoxically, the larger and more varied the world's cultural landscape becomes, and the more access everyday Americans have to information, the variety of literature we offer to high school students shrinks. Students encounter the same established authors over and over as they move from fifth to twelfth grade. My unit will introduce students to a new figure, who should intrigue, enlighten and entertain them.

Bob Kaufman (1925-1986), a founding member of the literary movement known as the Beats, is not only a new and historically significant figure for many students, but one whose work still feels fresh and topical. Like environmentally concerned young people today, he rejected consumerism and the trappings of success; he was against war and specifically the use of atomic weapons; and he was an early American follower of Eastern religions that have since become almost commonplace. Kaufman's work says important things about race, power and silencing in America; therefore, studying this poet provides an entry into a number of relevant discussions.