

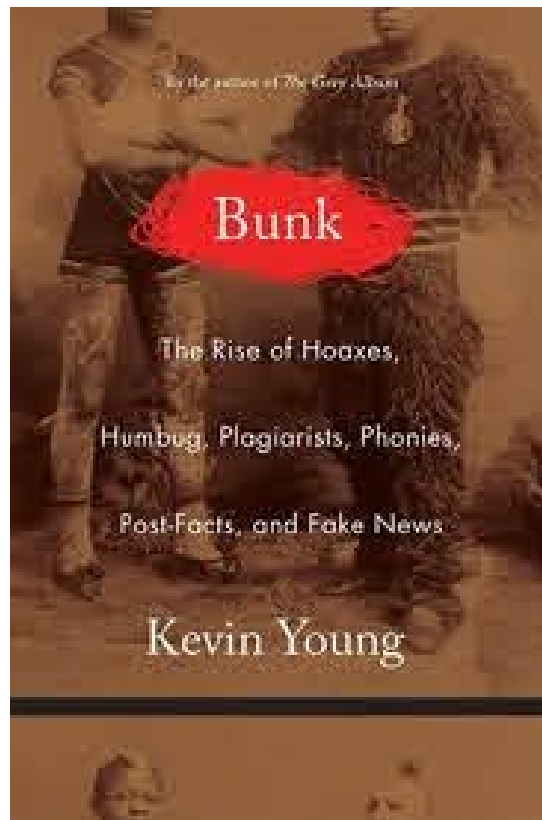
## Lesson Plan

# Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News

By Kevin Young

Developed by Cara Byrne, PhD  
Sara Fuller, PhD  
Kristine Kelly, PhD

Shared on behalf of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards



Teaching Kevin Young's *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News*  
**Anisfield-Wolf Lesson Plan**

This lesson plan provides background information, discussion questions, key quotations and activities to help explore Kevin Young's 2018 Anisfield-Wolf Award-winning book, *Bunk*.

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## ***Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News***

### **Background:**



**Kevin Young** (b. 1970) was born in Nebraska and studied poetry at Harvard, Brown and Stanford. As of December 2020, he has written fourteen books of poetry and essays, including *Book of Hours* (2014) and *Jelly Roll: A Blues* (2003). He is the poetry editor for *The New Yorker* and served as the director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture from 2016 - 2020. He also spent 11 years as a professor of creative writing and English at Emory University in Atlanta. In 2020, he was named the director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. He will begin serving in this role in January 2021. He was also named a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Young's first book of nonfiction, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, was published in 2012. This book explores the long history of African American storytelling and music traditions and the trickster figure. It was a finalist for the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism and a 2012 *New York Times* Notable Book, as well as the winner of the PEN Open Book Award.<sup>2</sup> *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News* was published by Graywolf Press in 2017 and was longlisted for the National Book Award. It also was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pen/Jean Stein Book Award, and it was named a *New York Times* Notable Book, a *New York Times* Book Review "Editors' Choice" selection, and a "Best Book of 2017" by numerous publications.



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<sup>1</sup> Image from Young's *New Yorker* profile <https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/kevin-young>

<sup>2</sup> Image from <https://www.anisfield-wolf.org/2018/04/kevin-young-strolls-through-black-history-in-new-poetry-collection-brown/>

## Anisfield-Wolf Award:



In his acceptance speech, Young describes winning the award as “a full circle” moment. He explains that he first learned of the Anisfield-Wolf award through Langston Hughes’ writing - as Hughes was a recipient of the award [for fiction in 1945](#). Like Young, Hughes was a poet who won the Anisfield-Wolf award not for his poetry but for his writing in a different genre. Hughes also spent some time in Topeka, Kansas, where Young grew up. Hughes’ papers are also kept at the Schomburg Center, where Young works. *Bunk* took him six years to write, and when he started, he thought “no one will care about fakery, but suddenly it was relevant.” When teaching *Bunk*, consider watching Young’s acceptance speech (minute marker 49.38 - 1.11.51).

## Discussion Questions:

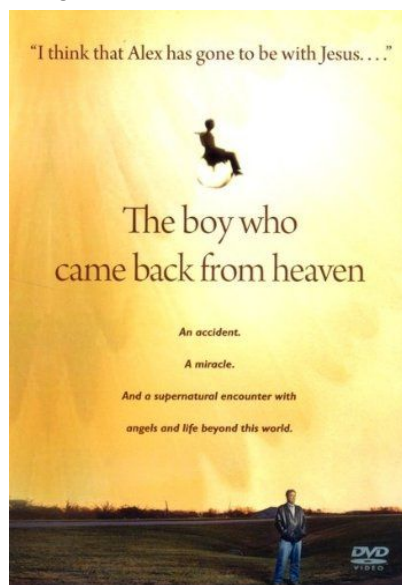
1. Throughout the book, Young develops a complex definition of “hoax.” Locate and discuss some of these key passages. (ex. “hoax is not about fact or fiction but fear” (pg. 156), “the hoax is ultimately a matter of life and death” (pg. 368))
  - a. Hoaxes “relied on the trappings of rational thought, employing vraisemblance (likelihood) to suggest racism as a scientific, natural position” (pg. 40) (and race is a “fake thing pretending to be real)
  - b. Humbug- curiosities, honor and horror of the hoax ; pleasurable feeling of being fooled (pg. 7); imposition under fair pretenses
2. Furthermore, how does Young define “humbug,” “plagiarism,” and “fake news”? What are some of his supporting examples?
3. In her [NPR review](#) of Young’s book, Annalisa Quinn argues that while Young’s research is sound and fascinating, she struggles with Young’s “knotted style,” stating: “Young, surely unintentionally, has a habit of saying things that sound great but mean little. These erode trust, build frustration, and ultimately feel like gentle cons or hoaxes of their own; phrases

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<sup>3</sup> The 2018 Anisfield-Wolf ceremony <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC-3er81dBE&t=3620s>

onto which we can project whatever meaning we like.” What is your reaction to Quinn’s views? What was your experience reading *Bunk*?

- a. For example, see page 57 “The Cottingley fairies suggest another race, one beyond race, which is to say, whiteness ever more purified”
4. Who is viewed as the most trustworthy? How does age, education, race, and class relate to trustworthiness? What does this tell us about privilege? (see page 56)
5. What is the harm in hoaxes that comfort - like spirit photographs or fairy photographs? (see page 58).
  - a. Or “heaven tourism” (pg. 52)



6. “What we need is not more immediate news - which we seem to crave, faster and faster - but more reliable information. We need less local color, or ideological coloring, and more depth; fewer people covering the same story than discovering a new one. We should write like no one is looking over our shoulder - except the future” (pg. 367)
7. In his first chapter, Young asks: “is there something especially American about the hoax?” (pg. 8). After finishing the book, what is his answer to this question? Do you agree?
8. Watch an excerpt of Oprah’s interview with James Frey (<http://www.nbcnews.com/video/msnbc-news/11040784>). How does she react to Frey’s lies? She was later criticized for her responses to him in the interview. Why do you think people came to Frey’s defense? (pg. 124)



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9. What is problematic with the phrase “It is what it is”? (pg. 136)
10. What is the difference between “kitsch” and “hoax”? (pg. 298, pg. 330)
11. In the coda, Young discusses his consideration of placing a hoax in the book, but ultimately decided against it. What do you think of this decision and his reasoning for his choice? (pg. 431)
12. Compare the Dreadnought Hoax (pg. 69+) with the Rachel Dolezal hoax/imposturing (pg. 382+)



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<sup>4</sup> Image from <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/oprahs-questions-for-james/7>

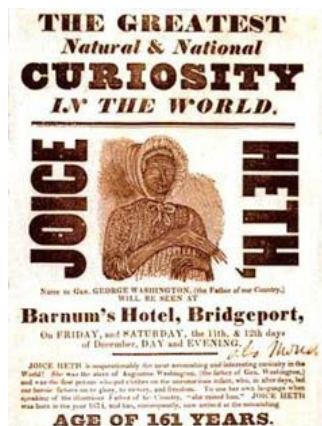
<sup>5</sup> Image from *Horace de Vere Cole and the Dreadnought Hoax*. “How Stuff Works”  
<https://www.missedinhistory.com/podcasts/dreadnought-hoax.htm>



13. Bunk very briefly discusses Trump's presidency, though Young does suggest that Trump is a modern day Barnum who signals that truth "doesn't matter" (pg. 444). He states: "What Trump really heralds is a time when there are no more experts" (pg. 445). How do you respond to these claims?
14. In [an interview with Diana Patrick of \*Publisher's Weekly\*](#), Young states that *Bunk* "was a hard book to write, in the sense that it required a lot of research, a lot of reading [...] Even the footnotes are extensive, but that's because I wanted to get it right. Footnotes are for proving and showing where you've been. Also, they're for the curious—they can then go and find the information on their own. I hope the footnotes indicate the ways that we need to learn how to research, write, and think critically. All those are skills that public libraries, especially, are really invested in, and they provide the resources for an individual to go and do that work." Think about your own research, reading, thinking, and writing practices. How do your own practices compare to how Young wrote *Bunk*?

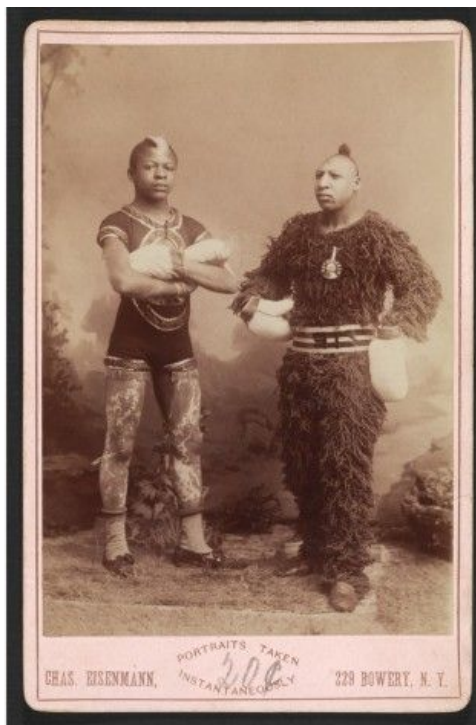
#### Notable Passages for Discussion:

- "There's indeed a powerful, persistent notion that the American character is filled not just with tall tales and sideshows but also with con men and fake Indians, pretend blacks and impostor prophets" (pg. 9).
- On reality TV: "As viewers, we inheritors to Barnum's America tend to feel a mix of *I can't believe I'm watching this* and *I can't believe that person did that* to *I can't wait to see what happens next*" (pg. 10).
- "Heth becomes representative of the 'open body': a grotesque not in a degenerative sense but still a racial grotesque in stark contrast to the classical one of George Washington, who remains ever idealized, aquiline, closed" (pg. 35).



<sup>6</sup> Image from <https://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/joice-heth-poster-1835>

- Defining the word ‘bunk:’ “The term *bunk* was itself born of conflict and race, coined in 1820 from the floor of the Sixteenth Congress when a North Carolina representatives continued to filibuster for the Missouri Compromise that made Missouri a slave state: though the question had been called, he said he had to give speech *for* or *to* Buncombe, his home county. ‘Buncombe’ got changed to *bunkum*, then shortened to *bunk*, giving name to that species of fakery, unnecessary flattery, and politicking phoniness that barely believes what it says” (pg. 36).
- Comparing an 1885 photograph that “depicts ‘Old Zip Barnum’s What is It’ alongside Ashbury Ben the Leopard Boy Age 17 years” to promotional photos of Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat (pg. 40)



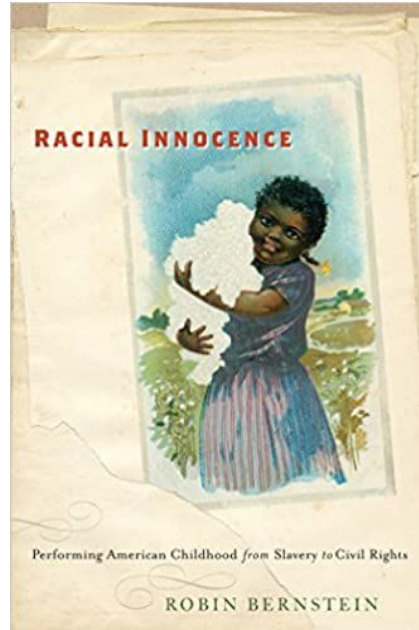
- On hoaxes: “The difficulty with any hoax is that it provides proof for those who already believe; exposed later, the hoax reveals beliefs the hoaxers themselves may not have been aware of. While the hoaxing in spirit photography was still honorific, soon the ghosts, like the hoax itself, would feature far more horror” (pg. 54).
- On scholar Robin Bernstein’s concept of ‘racial innocence:’ “[...] the girls themselves are framed by what critic Robin Bernstein calls racial innocence, a notion that began ‘by the

<sup>7</sup> Image from <https://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-bunk-kevin-young-20171109-story.html>

<sup>8</sup> Image from <https://www.vulture.com/2015/05/bromance-of-warhol-and-basquiat.html>



mid-nineteenth century, [when] sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly. Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment” (pg. 59).



- “Blackface remains exoticist and offensive as a practice not just because of its long tradition of mocking black selfhood, sexuality, and speech, but because of its assertion that black people are whites merely sullied by dark skin” (pg. 72).
- Truthiness vs. Truth: “Though it started as a joke, Stephen Colbert’s term *truthiness* remains useful because it indicates both distance from the truth and reliance on the appearance of it [...] ‘Truthiness is ‘What I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true.’ It’s not only that I *feel* it to be true, but that I *feel* it to be true. There’s not only an emotional quality, but there’s a selfish quality” (pgs. 119 - 120) & “The Truth can be hard. It’s never exactly invisible [...] Though strong, the Truth always looks sickly, or tired, or weary - unless the Truth smiles at you. The Truth has a good smile. The Truth works hard and is hard work. The Truth can run better than you might think, can go deep with defenders in his face and beat the buzzer. The Truth hurts, has literally been stabbed and survived” (pg. 377).
- On race as a time machine: “Race in a sense was a time machine: an invention whose users could go backward and forward in time, rewriting an unlikely past and forecasting a deterministic future. The hoax did much the same, keyed to race along the way” (pg. 162).
- Photographs of JT LeRoy as spirit photographs: “The carnivalesque she crafted is far more the spectacle of the sideshow, of voyeurism as an unexplored value that no camera can

contain. Photographs of LeRoy are spirit photographs, circus portraits, and anthropological studies in one” (pg. 216).



- “In no way homage, the face of the forgery actually manages to disparage the borrowed artist’s art. Every fake Basquiat, for instance - ebay alone is rife with them, complete with certificates of authenticity straight from genuine computers - threatens to lessen our complex notions of Basquiat’s work. We may begin to see his art brut skeletons and barbed-wire halos not as inspiring but as something anyone might do” (pg. 286).



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<sup>9</sup> Image from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jul/20/jt-leroy-story-modern-literary-hoax->

<sup>10</sup> Image from <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/can-tell-basquiat-real-richard-polsky-1232594>

- On art: “The stakes here aren’t just about art but about history and denial. Art comes from struggle, often with and against truth - the true artist regularly endures rejections, accusations of being a phony, a fake, a poor imitation of her predecessors” (pg. 287).
- On Art forgery: “The Dutchman Han van Meegeren, the most famed forger of the first part of the twentieth century before Elmyr assumed the mantle [...] forged any number of painters through the 1920s and 1930s, especially Vermeer, who was then becoming a Dutch national treasure, one especially valued given his small output” (pg. 271).



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- “What if journalism is inherently unethical?” (pg. 319)
- “Online, we are all ghostwriters and spirit photographers” (pg. 327)
- As a teacher of black literature, Dolezal “wears the mask not to hide but to gain authority over the very thing she wants to be. How very white of her” (pg. 386)
- “To plagiarize another is to steal a bit of that person’s soul” (pg. 403)
- “[...] plagiarism doesn’t just express anxieties of paternity but is both patronizing and paternalistic. That is its form of power: plagiarism asks us, *What have you got to lose?* Plagiarism, the ultimate dog whistle” (pg. 416).
- “Plagiarists in the end are less liberators than plantation owners, the most grotesque American gothic of all” (pg. 419).

<sup>11</sup> Image from

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/2019/10/09/van-meegeren-forger-fooled-nazis-review-indulgent-take-ripping/>

- “Lynching, like plagiarism, is a ritual connected to power. It is this way the opposite of hysteria, or rather, a reaction to it: where the hysteric is by definition out of control, a suffering rooted in the mind that affects the body, the lynch mob like the witch hunt marks a mass hysteria that’s a constant if sometimes submerged part of the body politic” (pg. 427).
- “The hoaxter lies as a form of escapism, all the more pernicious in that it pretends to be real. Bunk doesn’t care if it’s real or not - it just expects you to accept it” (pg. 444)

#### Website Resources:

- Today Show Interview with Kaavya Viswanathan:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXj5XE3XKk8>
- Time Magazine Top 10 Literary Hoaxes:  
[http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1868982\\_1868981\\_1868978,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1868982_1868981_1868978,00.html)
- Conan Doyle’s 1920 Defense of Fairies:  
[https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php/The\\_Evidence\\_for\\_Fairies](https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php/The_Evidence_for_Fairies)



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<sup>12</sup> Image from

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/photography/cottingley-fairies-hoax-pictures-auction-arthur-conan-doyle-a8848866.html>

- “A Million Little Lies” <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/celebrity/million-little-lies>
- Oprah/James Frey confrontation:  
<http://www.oprah.com/own-tv-guide-magazines-top-25-best-oprah-show-moments/moment-18-oprah-confronts-james-frey-video>
- Oprah’s interview with James Frey (5 years after initial interview):  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYRQ\\_ZY1YoA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYRQ_ZY1YoA)
- Melania Trump’s RNC speech vs. Michelle Obama’s speech:  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/melania-trumps-rnc-speech-vs-michelle-obamas-2008-dnc-speech/2016/07/19/ce608edc-4d71-11e6-bf27-405106836f96\\_video.html?utm\\_term=.34ab1f557695](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/melania-trumps-rnc-speech-vs-michelle-obamas-2008-dnc-speech/2016/07/19/ce608edc-4d71-11e6-bf27-405106836f96_video.html?utm_term=.34ab1f557695)
- T.Mills Kelly history course “Lying about the Past” and the hoax assignment  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/05/how-the-professor-who-fooled-wikipedia-got-caught-by-reddit/257134/>
- T. Mills Kelly--Atlantic writeup by Yoni Appelbaum  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/05/how-the-professor-who-fooled-wikipedia-got-caught-by-reddit/257134/>
- Humbug is the operative word for two kinds of Americans— Inlander.com  
<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.inlander.com/spokane/humbug-is-the-operative-word-for-two-one-of-a-kind-americans/Content%3foid=8993920&media=AMP+HTML>
- Beyond Bullshit Donald Trump’s Philosophy Of Language— Philosophy Now  
[https://philosophynow.org/issues/121/Beyond\\_Bullshit\\_Donald\\_Trumps\\_Philosophy\\_of\\_Language](https://philosophynow.org/issues/121/Beyond_Bullshit_Donald_Trumps_Philosophy_of_Language)



## Poetry & Nonfiction Activity

Kevin Young wears many hats - from museum curator to literary critic to poet. Compare some of his poetry, including “Sting” and “Nightstick [A Mural for Michael Brown],” to the themes that emerge in *Bunk*.

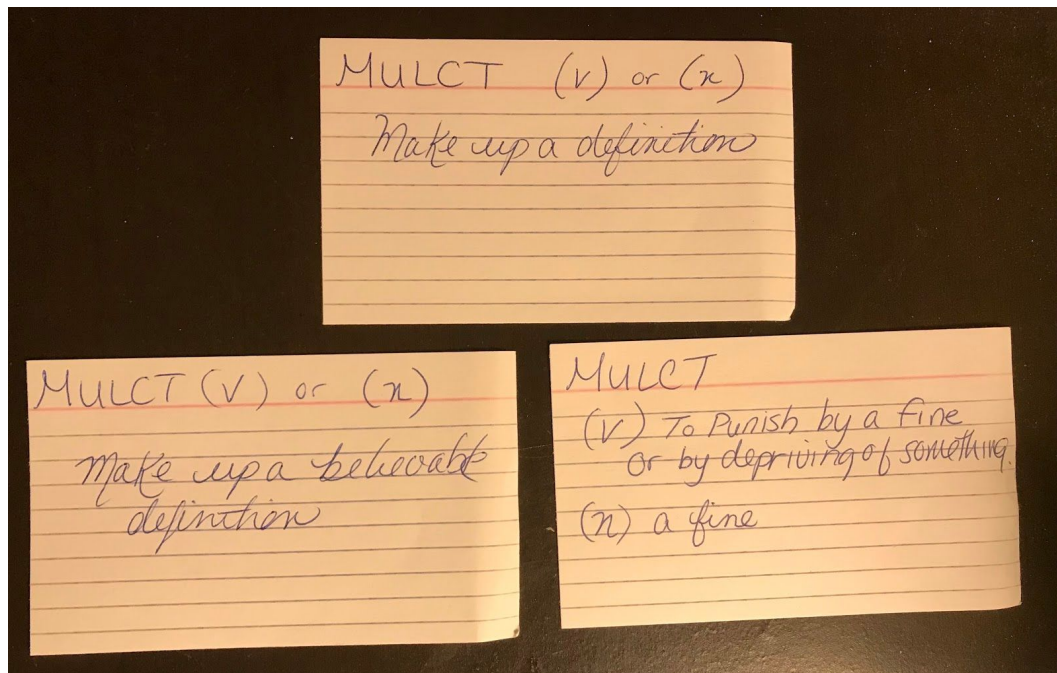
For now,  
the sting  
of being—  
tomorrow already  
a memory, a bite  
bright & burning.

*Excerpt from “Sting” (published by The Yale Review; available  
<https://yalereview.yale.edu/sting>)*

Don’t  
dare take  
a left  
into the wrong  
skin. Death  
is not dark  
but a red siren  
who will not blow  
breath into your open  
mouth, arrested  
like a heart.

*Excerpt from “Nightstick [A Mural for Michael Brown]” (published by Poets.org; available  
at <https://poets.org/poem/nightstick-mural-michael-brown>)*

## Vocabulary Hoax Activity



### *“Balderdash” or playing a hoax game*

- Select a few unusual or lightly obscure words from the dictionary.
- Print the word on notecards. On one notecard, write the real definition.
- Pass the cards to 3-4 “panelists”. Each panelist makes up a definition for the word. The panelists should write seemingly credible, dictionary-like definitions. The panelist with the real definition “pretends” to make up a definition while actually rewriting the real one.
- Shuffle the cards and read them to players or teams of players who score a point by choosing the correct/ real definition.

### *Follow up and Discussion*

- Why do made-up definitions seem credible?
- What about the writing or the reading of the false or real definitions created belief/ disbelief?
- Consider how structures (like the structure of a dictionary definition) or meeting preconceptions or expectations promote credibility.
- How does an authority figure or an authoritative voice override our doubts?

### *Connections*

- Discussion of the Cottingley Fairies or the Dreadnought Hoax
- T. Mills Kelly’s Wikipedia Hoax assignment (see links listed in website resources)

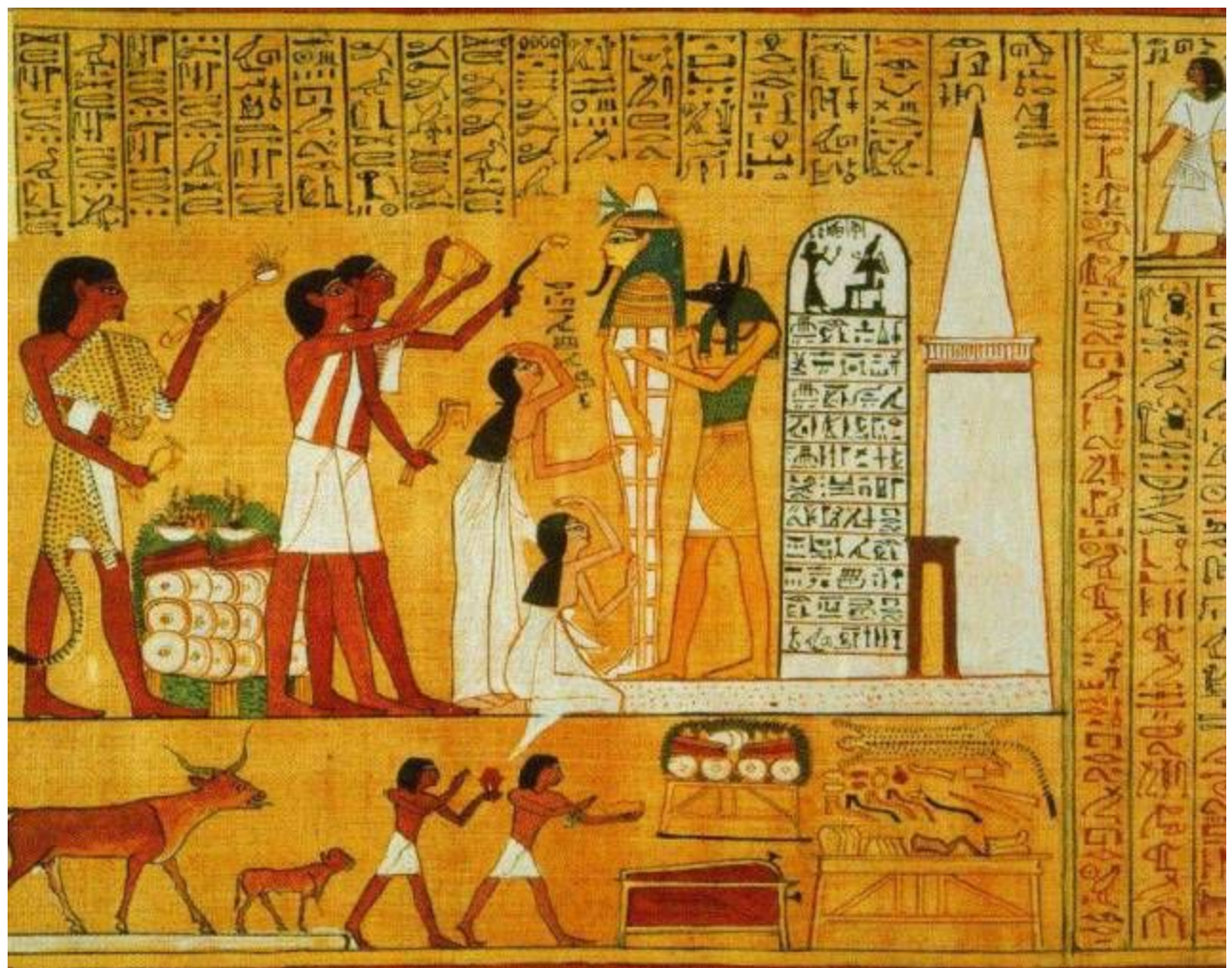
## Race Depictions in Art Activity

Directions: Take the post it notes given to you by your instructor. Then, make your way to each of the art pieces displayed around the room. At each one consider what the piece says about race. What do you notice with regards to race? Write down your observations on separate post it notes and stick them to the chart paper that is next to each image. If you run out of post its, please get more from the instructor. You should leave at least one comment on each piece. Please return to your seat when you are done.



"The Three Mulattoes of Esmeraldas" (1599)







(1935)





Dr. Seuss *Mulberry Street*







1900