Racism and the Enlightenment SOURCES IN CONVERSATION | David Hume, Of National Characters (1754), and Robert Hancock, The Tea Party (1756–1757) The promise of the Enlightenment coexisted side by side with a darker reality: slavery. Foreign trade boomed in the eighteenth century, fueled by the importation of millions of enslaved African people to work the colonial plantations that produced goods for the European market. The British Empire took the lead in the transatlantic slave trade, which had a direct impact on both intellectual and material culture. Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) was a close friend of Adam Smith, and they both worked to observe and understand the world around them. For Hume, this included examining the different “species” of men and variations among them. Following trends in Enlightenment science, Hume believed that nature was an inherently hierarchical system waiting to be discovered, ordered, and classified. The excerpt below is from a 1758 edition of his essay “Of National Characters.” This edition includes a footnote, not found in the first edition, that Hume first added to the second edition in 1754 and retained with slight alterations through subsequent editions. It asserts his view that whites are naturally superior to all other “breeds” of men, notably “negroes,” whom he singles out by name. Hume’s belief in white superiority was not unique, nor was it confined to his educated audience. Engraver Robert Hancock’s (1730–1817) image, known as The Tea Party, was the most popular of all ceramic transfer-print designs during the second half of the eighteenth century. Transfer printing was a new and inexpensive way to decorate porcelain, making it affordable to a broader clientele. Hancock perfected the process, and The Tea Party was reproduced on a variety of objects, notably tea utensils, such as the tea saucer here. Hancock’s design portrays a fashionable couple in a garden seated in front of a table laid out for tea. To their left, a black boy wearing a turban bows as he pours water from a kettle into a teapot. To their right, a small dog sits by the woman’s side. As tea from China and sugar from the West Indies became more widely available in England, the practice of tea drinking grew in popularity while remaining intimately connected to the labor of enslaved people and to the new global economy. Of National Characters The vulgar are very apt to carry all national characters to extremes; and having once established it as a principle, that any people are knavish, or cowardly, or ignorant, they will admit of no exception, but comprehend every individual under the same character. Men of sense condemn these undistinguishing judgments; though at the same time, they allow, that each nation has a peculiar set of manners, and that some particular qualities are more frequently to be met with among one people than among their neighbors. The common people in Switzerland have surely more probity than those of the same rank in Ireland; and every prudent man will, from that circumstance alone, make a difference in the trust which he reposes in each.… Different reasons are assigned for these national characters; while some account for them from moral and others from physical causes. By moral causes, I mean all circumstances, which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons, and which render a peculiar set of manners habitual to us. Of this kind are, the nature of the government, the revolutions of public affairs, the plenty or penury in which the people live, the situation of the nation with regard to its neighbors, and such like circumstances. By physical causes, I mean those qualities of the air and climate, which are supposed to work insensibly on the temper, by altering the tone and habit of the body, and giving a particular complexion, which tho’ reflection and reason may sometimes overcome, yet will it prevail among the generality of mankind, and have an influence on their manners. That the character of a nation will very much depend on moral causes must be evident to the most supersicial observer; since a nation is nothing but a collection of individuals, and the manners of individuals are frequently determined by these causes. As poverty and hard labor debase the minds of the common people, and render them unfit for any science and ingenious profession; so where any government becomes very oppressive to all its subjects, it must have a proportional effect on their temper and genius, and must banish all the liberal arts from among them. As to physical causes, I am inclined to doubt altogether of their operation in this particular; nor do I think, that men owe any thing of their temper or genius to the air, food, or climate. I confess, that the contrary opinion may justly, at first sight, seem very probable; since we find, that these circumstances have an influence over every other animal, and that even those creatures, which are fitted to live in all climates, such as dogs, horses, etc. do not attain the same perfection in all. The courage of bull-dogs and game-cocks seems peculiar to England. Flanders is remarkable for large and heavy horses: Spain for horses light, and of good mettle. And any breed of these creatures, transported from one country into another, will soon lose the qualities, which they derived from their native climate. It may be asked, why not the same with men? There are few questions more curious than this, or which will occur oftener in our enquiries concerning human affairs; and therefore it may be proper to give it a serious examination. The human mind is of a very imitative nature; nor is it possible for any set of men to converse often together, without acquiring a similitude of manners, and communicating to each other their vices as well as virtues. The propensity to company and society is strong in all rational creatures; and the same disposition, which gives us this propensity, makes us enter deeply into each other’s sentiments, and causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions. Where a number of men are united into one political body, the occasions of their intercourse must be so frequent, for defence, commerce, and government, that, together with the same speech or language, they must contract a resemblance in their manners, and have a common or national character, as well as a personal one, peculiar to each individual. Now though nature produces all kinds of temper and understanding in great abundance, it follows not that she always produces them in like proportions, and that in every society the ingredients of industry and indolence, valor and cowardice, humanity and brutality, wisdom and folly, will be mixed after the same manner. In the infancy of society, if any of these dispositions be found in greater abundance than the rest, it will naturally prevail in the composition, and give a tincture to the national character. If the characters of men depended on the air and climate, the degrees of heat and cold should naturally be expected to have a mighty influence; since nothing has a greater effect on all plants and irrational animals. And indeed there is some reason to think, that all the nations, which live beyond the polar circles or betwixt the tropics, are inferior to the rest of the species, and are utterly incapable of all the higher attainments of the human mind. The poverty and misery of the northern inhabitants of the globe, and the indolence of the southern from their few necessities, may, perhaps, account for this remarkable difference, without having recourse to physical causes. This however is certain, that the characters of nations are very promiscuous in the temperate climates, and that almost all the general observations, which have been formed of the more southern or more northern nations in these climates, are found to be uncertain and fallacious. [Originally in a footnote] I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but ’tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly. A photo shows a bowl and a saucer. The utensils have an imprint of a man, woman, and a child sitting on a bench under a tree. Adapted from David Hume, Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects, new ed. (London: Printed for A. Millar; and A. Kincaid and A. Donaldson, at Edinburgh, 1758), 119, 121, 122, 124, 125. THOUGHT QUESTIONS According to Hume, what reasons have people provided to explain differences among peoples and cultures in both the past and the present? Why does Hume give more weight to “moral” than to “physical” causes of difference? What role does nature play in his view, and how does this account for what he describes as whites’ superiority?