



Hannah-Jones on the power of collective memory


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## < Can therapy solve racism?

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ISABETH MENDOZA, HOST:

Just a heads-up, y'all. This story contains some strong language. All right, onto the show.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MENDOZA: This is CODE SWITCH from NPR. I'm Isabeth Mendoza. I'm part of the first group of CODE SWITCH fellows, and I want to introduce you to some people that I spent the past few months talking to.

GRISELL VALENCIA: My name is Grisell Valencia (ph). I am based out of Atlanta, Ga. I identify as Afro-Latina.

EDWIN QUEZADA: My name is Edwin Quezada (ph). I'm based in Camden, N.J., and I identify as an American-born person of Dominican descent.

MENDOZA: Like so many people, Edwin and Grisell have been grappling with their own identities. They wanted to know where they fit in conversations about anti-Blackness, especially after the summer of 2020 - how what they were watching play out in the news intersected with their real lives and how to be better advocates for racial justice when they were still unpacking the anti-Blackness that they witnessed themselves as young people.

But when the conversations with their family and friends didn't cut it anymore, Edwin and Grisell decided to try therapy, just like 20% of American adults in 2020. That's 2.8 million more than the year before, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. And I have been wondering, how useful of a tool even is therapy for exploring problematic experiences around identity? Can therapy erase racism? Can it undo how we internalize racial trauma? Can it help us stop asking, why aren't I good enough? That's what we're exploring today, starting with Grisell.

VALENCIA: I identify as Afro-Latina, Colombiana.

MENDOZA: Grisell is first-gen Colombian. She has contagious energy and usually has her hair in a 'fro or in long, black braids.

VALENCIA: If you were to ask me, like, hey, do you feel like you're, like, "dark-skinned," quote-unquote, or light-skinned? I would tell you I'm probably right in the middle, and I am fully aware of the privilege that comes with that.

MENDOZA: She's 35 years old and the baby of her family. In fact, she's the only one in her family who was born in the States.

VALENCIA: I hate the word mixed, but I get it all the time, especially here down South. You look mixed or ambiguous, like racially ambiguous or something like that. Someone once said that to me, and I said, what on Earth? Right? It's kind of like, you don't know what the fuck it could be. Like, I'm just waiting for you to tell me. Like, give me something. Give me a hint. Right? Just always processing, always explaining.

MENDOZA: Grisell grew up in Boston, and this need to always explain feels different in the States than when she visits Colombia.

VALENCIA: If you go to Colombia, you literally - it looks like a straight-up rainbow. We are all different hues, different eye colors, different desde color de piel. We are just all - it's beautiful. That's - I think that's a really cool, refreshing part. And it's also a phenomenal kind of a wake-up call, right? Because when you see your primo, that it's straight up Negro, ain't no mestizaje there. You're kind of like, man, we're related. So there's no denying that this is where we come from.

MENDOZA: Quick explanatory comma - mestizo is the Spanish word for mixed race. Mestizaje refers to the mixing of races, to create an undetermined racial identity and appearance. But added wrinkle here - in some Latin American and Caribbean cultures, mestizaje is also about mixing away Blackness, basically trying to get to whiteness. So for cultures or families who are trying to claim their European ancestry and distance themselves from direct ties to Blackness and Indigeneity, mestizaje is seen as beneficial.

VALENCIA: My mom is definitely more Black Indigenous, for sure, almost like indigena Negra. My dad was definitely much more straight-up Black, talking about, you know, 'fro, dark-skinned. So yeah, we were - I guess the popular word back in the day, but I know it's not a great word, is mestizos - right? - in Colombia, which - that's a controversial word in itself, just a melting pot of a lot of everything, right?

MENDOZA: Even though Grisell looks like her family and they have similar skin tones, her hair was the most textured compared to everyone else, and it was a point of contention. She had the, quote-unquote, "difficult hair," and everyone talked about it. An uncle even called her Buckwheat from the movie, "The Little Rascals". And when she hung out with her cousins...

VALENCIA: We played "Little Mermaid" in the bathtub, and their hair - it was like, (vocalizing). And my shit was not doing that. You know what I mean? It was like a 'fro. But I remember this one Christmas, my cousin's father gifted us all Barbies. And when everyone was unwrapping, you know the excitement - el papel, the paper (makes rustling noise). And I opened up the Barbie, and my Barbie was Black, you know? And everyone kind of, like, looked at my Barbie, and I looked at their Barbies, and I could kind of, like, identify to their Barbies, too. And I wasn't this kind of, like, as melanated as this Barbie. And I was like, oh my gosh, I am different. And he's telling me that because of my hair, I should identify to this Barbie as opposed to that Barbie. And I cried, to be honest because at that moment, as a child, I think that just marked the fact that I was seen different, too.

MENDOZA: And because of that, something that could have been really sweet, her family seeing her and gifting her a Barbie that looked like her, well, it was actually painful. She brought the incident up later to her cousin, the daughter of the uncle who gifted her the Barbie.

VALENCIA: This is us, like, just chatting, catching up and reconnecting as adults now, as primas. She was just like, girl, it wasn't that big of a deal. Really? Did it bother you like that? And I'm like, hell, yeah, it did, man. I was never able to play Ariel with y'all, like, fully in the tub 'cause, you know, I wasn't able to do the flowy hair thing, and that just compounded everything. It was a moment.

MENDOZA: In middle school and high school, she had Black American friends who took her to hair salons that specialized in Black hair. There, she learned what worked for her hair and what didn't. It was a positive memory for her. And after years of using relaxers, she started wearing her hair natural as a freshman in high school. Then, a Puerto Rican teacher of hers made a comment.

VALENCIA: And I remember her telling me, like, you are so pretty, but I feel like sometimes - I swear (laughter) - this is crazy. She said, God gives hair like that just to kind of keep us honest or to keep us humble, right? And that was another knock.

MENDOZA: These moments framed Grisell's experience and left her questioning her place in, quote-unquote, "Latinidad".

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

VALENCIA: In a family where race dynamics - and just these things weren't discussed. We never spoke about these things. It was just, oh, somos Colombianos, we're Colombian. We're Latinas, Latinos - if we even used that back then.

QUEZADA: My parents have always had a simple response, which was, you're Dominican, mijó. You're all of it. I felt proud, safe, comfortable when they would say, hey, you're just Dominican and embrace it.

MENDOZA: That's Edwin Quezada. He's 39 years old. And you heard it - he's Dominican and proud of it.

QUEZADA: I remember my grandma would say rubio nunca, blanco a veces, o Indio Dominicano siempre.

MENDOZA: Edwin is tall and slim. He has dark, round eyes and wavy hair that goes down to behind his ears. He's light-skinned like his mom, but he's part of a blended family. His stepdad, who raised him with his mom and his half siblings, all have darker skin.

QUEZADA: I did and I kind of still do grapple with my racial ambiguity because I didn't like the feeling of feeling differently by different people, depending on their journey and perspective. I might be perceived as white by one person but as a person of color by another.

MENDOZA: Edwin grew up going back and forth between New York and D.R.

QUEZADA: I remember going back home to the Caribbean islands, young, like 2 years old, 3 years old, living with my grandma for a while out there. There's a thing that they say - (speaking Spanish). And so basically, what it meant was, like, yo, he might look light-skinned, but he's come here; he's from the land.

MENDOZA: No matter where he lived or how others saw him, the Dominican community was always his home.

QUEZADA: Somebody wants to know who I am, I'll be like, I'm a Dominicano platinero from the Heights.

MENDOZA: But in elementary school, he started thinking about race and noticing how light he was in comparison to his siblings and some of his friends. It made him feel like he wasn't part of any particular community. He wanted to belong.

QUEZADA: And especially in the Dominican Republic, the majority of the culture is Indigenous - brown and Black, right? And so they would always target me out. Like, hey, you know, like, you're us, but you're blanco or rubio. Or at one point, they even started calling me the Pink Panther, right? Because of, you know, the Black Panthers, and they were like, but you're, like, not Black, so you're like the Pink Panther.

MENDOZA: In the States, Edwin was also treated differently than a lot of his friends in high school who were darker than him.

QUEZADA: I would get stopped because I was with them, but I'd be one of the first ones to be like, go home. And then my other friends would probably - you know, had to deal with whatever they had to deal with. You know, if the cop was looking for something for whatever reason, then they would take him to the precinct and wait for parents to come. But for me, I remember multiple times kind of being targeted because I was with my Dominican friends - right? - with my culture, but then being left alone, I'm assuming, because of the color of my skin.

MENDOZA: Edwin was often asked what he was. When someone questioned his identity, he turned to his parents for answers. He often hit a wall in those conversations with them. He's still grappling with those questions. Grisell is also trying to figure out how to talk to her family. While she feels supported and loved, just like Edwin, she wants to go deeper. She's ready to go there in conversations about identity with family and friends.

VALENCIA: Not too long ago, I was talking to my cousin, and I was like, you know, as a term of endearment, they call folks Negra. Aye, Negra, venga aca. Aye, Negra. And I literally am like, yo, how much of this is stemming from, you know, the colonizer and all the other shit that we've been through, and how much of it is really a term of endearment? Or when I had those conversations with my Black American friends, they're like, you know, are they calling her the N-word? And I'm like, no, no, it's a term of endearment. I want to be that person in my family where I'm like, the buck stops here. I am able to identify these things as unhealthy. I am able to identify these things as not normal that we should pour into or enable. And it's a lot of work.

QUEZADA: It's difficult to speak about it with my parents, but I have a really cool stepfather of mine who's a Afro-Latino, a Afro Dominican, who's really outspoken when it comes to anti-Blackness, right? And then my brother, he's darker. He's, like, a dark Latino, right? And so I usually bounce ideas off of him. Like, hey, listen; how did it feel if you went through a situation like this? Or how do you feel about the protests? So we kind of, like, bounce ideas off of that.

MENDOZA: Grisell and Edwin both have different relationships to Blackness than their families. They also have a different understanding and acceptance of AfroLatinidad. And the way Edwin, a white-presenting Dominican man, and Grisell, an Afro-Latina, saw and moved in the world were impacted by this.

QUEZADA: I went through my own trauma going to school in the South Bronx. Like, the high school that I went to was considered to be the No. 1 provider of inmates for Rikers Island. So we had a very structured way in that school, right? Like, everything was extremely structured. And if you got out of line, you get suspended or you - it's like that whole school-to-jail pipeline structure.



VALENCIA: I think that the older that I get and the more that I learn, the more I realize the importance of - yes, having community and fellowship, that's huge. But having a safe soundboard, a professional that hopefully checks you on your shit, that provides a different perspective - that wasn't there to just be like, oh, when that person kept saying that you had pelo malo, it wasn't a bad thing. You know how it is in our family. You know, culturally, OK? You know, and it's kind of like nah. That wasn't really cool for me, to be completely honest. So when you tap into those conversations about identity, how do you not tie that back to those experiences of anti-Blackness growing up? They matter.

MENDOZA: Professor Tanya Hernandez is a law professor at Fordham. She's publishing her third book called "Racial Innocence: Unmasking Latino Anti-Black Bias And The Struggle For Equality." Basically, the book breaks down the misconception that Latinos are exempt from racism because of their ethnicity and multicultural background. She says people who are darker skinned, who have African features and hair textures first learn about racism and anti-Blackness at home. Professor Hernandez calls it family as the scene of the crime. And she went through it, too.

TANYA HERNANDEZ: You know, within my own family, I had battle with my grandmother. The part of the battle with the grandmother was all about hair, hair, hair, hair. She didn't like the curls. She wanted it always straightened. She didn't want too much sun. A little bit of sun - a little bit of a suntan, that's OK. Not too much because then you could be confused as African American. So all of this is about letting me know the African part, don't let that show. That's inferior. We don't want that on display.

MENDOZA: I know we're talking about this phrase family as the scene of the crime as it relates to anti-Blackness, but it also shows up in therapy. Family is often the place you go back to, to unpack formative moments as we saw for Grisell and Edwin. It's been said over and over that since 2020, the U.S. has been and maybe still is facing a racial reckoning. Professor Hernandez says that specific summer underscored that not every Latinx person gets the same kind of experience. When folks were out protesting for BLM, there weren't just Latinx people showing up as allies. There were also Latinx people who had skin in the game because of their own experiences. Professor Hernandez says these dynamics showed that not only has there been an ongoing erasure of AfroLatinidad, there was also a failure to recognize white privilege across the Latinx community. Grisell talks about this with her friends.

VALENCIA: What do you mean by Afro-Latina? What does it mean? And is this a convenient kind of, like, label now, you know what I mean? Is it just because folks think they're Black and they're not Black? You know, and now I'm kind of - and you just - you do the research, and you start to talk to folks. Like yo, Blackness is global. Blackness is global. Like, the things that we've experienced here, though different or nuanced, people go through it all over the world.

MENDOZA: Here's professor Hernandez again.

HERNANDEZ: Latin American and Caribbean societies have for so long tried to deny African heritage, tried to make it sound as if it were less important, that itself doesn't deserve any kind of attention because more important in the mix is the Spanish ancestry or the Portuguese ancestry. Approximately 90% of the 10-point million African slaves that survived the Middle Passage and were brought to the Americas - and I use that S purposely - were brought to Latin America and the Caribbean. So that the imprint, if you will, of African forcible slavery is really a Latin American and Spanish-speaking Caribbean story even more than it is a U.S.-based, North American-based story.

MENDOZA: Here is Grisell again.

VALENCIA: Our history speaks to a very prideful people, a very much, you know, flag wearing, music repping (speaking Spanish). You know, that's just how we are, you know? (Singing in Spanish). I mean, it goes on and on, right? And we're like just like we're different, we're all kind of like (speaking Spanish) - right? - (speaking Spanish). Yeah, that's true but also not really. We come from a lineage of erasure, (speaking Spanish) - literally (laughter) I'm sorry, was - the purpose was to erase Blackness. So maybe we didn't have Jim Crow. But we had (speaking Spanish) which was literally - the idea was to eliminate or dilute the Blackness. That comes from shame. You travel back home. You still see the same dynamics. Those that are Black are still the most underrepresented, oppressed, poor. You name it. So it's - you don't erase that, you know. And I think that coming from a people (speaking Spanish) Latino, stand up - you know, like, all this stuff is, like, yeah, it's cool, there's truth to that.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

VALENCIA: But we have a lot of work to do because we've been complacent in what's been fed to us as a unity, and it's not the full truth.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MENDOZA: So if this is where Grisell and Edwin were not too long ago - a little confused, a little upset and more than ready to figure some things out - after the break, we're going to hear what happened when they brought all of those feelings to therapy. Stay with us.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MENDOZA: Isabeth here for CODE SWITCH. After the summer of 2020, Grisell and Edwin found themselves needing more than family and friends to help them process what they were living through because as they watched the racial reckoning unfold around the country, they were experiencing some pretty painful aftereffects in their own lives. Grisell was working in human resources, and she was one of a few people of color in the department.

VALENCIA: And I remember feeling hopeless, to be honest. And another thing that didn't help was all of these conversations that we had to - I had to have at work about it because it wasn't just let's chat, how are you feeling? It's kind of, like, just peeling the scab over and over and over, and educate us, and how did that affect you, and do you feel like that was OK? Like, as a person of color, do you feel like that messaging sufficed? Like, was that message the right message? What do you think?

And you're sad, and you're confused, and you're like, I am just praying and hoping that my loved ones aren't killed on their way home, driving. It really, really got to me. And I think that that was just another kind of factor that led me to think, Grisell, you're going to have to find someone - a therapist to talk to because it consumed me, for sure.

QUEZADA: I started worrying about my brother, my father, students - specifically a lot of students 'cause a lot of students that I teach - their fathers either have been incarcerated or coming out of jail or are - you know, they're dealing with their own mental health, or they are dealing with addiction. And it worried me a lot. Yeah.

MENDOZA: At the time, Edwin was a special education teacher at a charter school in Camden, N.J. Each classroom had what's called a word wall, highlighting a new word that was learned in class. Edwin decided to make it into an ofrenda wall, honoring the lives lost and allowing students space and time to process. While the school

administration didn't go so far as to force him to take it down, he wasn't allowed to keep adding to it. Then he subbed for a class, and the students chose to watch the movie "The Hate U Give." It's based on a young adult novel about a 16-year-old girl who sees the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend at the hands of a police officer. Edwin got in trouble for that, too.

QUEZADA: So then this all caused me to kind of, like, start losing my voice, and I couldn't advocate as freely as I wanted to. My anxiety was getting a little bit worse because I was - you know, the world was going one way, and then I started seeing kind of, like, how it parallels each other, right? And you don't want to, like, try therapy out.

MENDOZA: When Edwin started looking for a therapist, he said it was important for him to find someone who could understand what he was going through at work. Cost was a concern. He didn't know until much later that therapy was covered by his insurance.

QUEZADA: I kind of reached out to a colleague of mine. And I was like, hey, listen, I'm really in need of a good therapist. I had a therapist before, but I want somebody who's recommended when it comes to anti-Blackness, when it comes to topics of racism and somebody who can kind of guide me. So my colleague - he's an activist. And so he recommended some - a therapist, and then after I connected with her, it was, like, so amazing.

MENDOZA: Grisell wanted to get even more specific. She wanted someone who was Afro Latina, in her age range and someone she could relate to. She went through every therapy list that popped up on her Instagram, and she emailed everyone that fit her criteria. She didn't hear back from a lot of the people that she reached out to. She dug deep through the Therapy for Black Girls directory. It's an online space dedicated to encouraging the mental wellness of Black women and girls.

VALENCIA: I think it was like the 27th or the 29th page. I had put, like, Afro Latina in Atlanta. And I was just digging, and I saw all of these profiles of ladies that I'm like, I know they would be phenomenal, but damn, I don't think I could be bilingual with this person. I can't speak Spanglish with this person. This person won't know what it's like to be called pelo malo (ph), you know, as a kid since forever. And these drivers and these small kind of nuances mattered to me.

MENDOZA: Finding POC therapists can be hard. In 2019, only 17% of psychologists were people of color, according to the U.S. Census and the American Psychological Association Center for Workforce Studies. The largest percentage of those POC psychologists were Hispanic - 7% to be exact. Grisell eventually found someone through the directory just as she decided to leave that very white HR job.

VALENCIA: It so happened that I started to interview almost around the same time that I started therapy. And I was having some issues with offers and making decisions. And that's one of our goals - right? - talking about just other women of color and with identity, navigating those corporate and wider than just, like, career and imposter syndrome.

MENDOZA: Edwin was also working on finding his voice at work, especially after his school kept blocking all the ways he was trying to offer an emotional outlet for his students in the summer of 2020. He felt like he was swimming against a current, questioning himself as a teacher and feeling isolated with limited support from his colleagues or his administration. He brought all of this up to his therapist.

QUEZADA: And it went well because I was able to have somebody who says, yeah, you're not alone. Like, yes, that's - like, what happened there, them stopping this or

them not allowing you to kind of, like, explore that more - that's messed up. Like, you're not alone. Like, you're not wrong for it - right? - because that's my thing. I'm like, oh, my God, am I going too hard, or am I seeing that situation kind of wrong? Do I have to slow down? Are the students even prepared to know - to learn about situations like that? But then the therapist kind of gave me, like, that affirmation to be like, nah, man, you're doing the right thing. So that gave me strength. It gave me energy.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

VALENCIA: I am feeling encouraged and nervous.

MENDOZA: A few weeks ago, Edwin and Grisell sent me voice memos before their therapy appointments.

QUEZADA: I'm a little nervous. I'm usually nervous when I log into my appointment.

VALENCIA: Our next session will very likely be focused on inner child work.

QUEZADA: The type of person I am, I tend to suppress my feelings a lot, and I rarely would even share them with someone.

VALENCIA: My therapist mentioned that I was being avoidant. And I'm hoping to develop more tools to help care for this younger version of myself.

QUEZADA: I need to hold and sit with some of the feelings and emotions that I usually share.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DANIEL OLAVARRIA: Therapy cannot go back in history and change what people may have said or done to you.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

OLAVARRIA: Therapy can't erase what you will experience today and what you will experience tomorrow. Therapy will not change what your parents said or did to you when you were younger. What therapy can do is it can help us reconsider the meaning that we draw from those experiences.

MENDOZA: Therapists I talked to believe therapy can help people sort through the pain brought on from experiencing racism, like Grisell being told she had pelo malo. That was Daniel Olavarria, a licensed clinical social worker who provides online video therapy for clients in New York, California and Florida.

OLAVARRIA: It can have a tremendous impact on the story that people then tell about themselves. The racism that a person experiences - does it translate into why aren't I good enough? What would it take for me to be good enough? It can shift it from that to, man, there's some really, like, broken parts about the world as it exists today, and that has nothing to do with me, right? You know, and that's frustrating, and that's - it's infuriating. And I don't internalize that as an indication of my brokenness, of my flawed-ness (ph).

MENDOZA: Therapists also believe therapy can heal the consequences of racism like internalized white supremacy.

SHAY VILLA: There is a reason it's hard to let go of internalized white supremacy. What do you think you're going to be gaining from it?

MENDOZA: That's a question Chicago-based psychotherapist Shay Villa asks clients, especially those who want to work on their own anti-Blackness. She also asks how is internalized racism harming you? How is it disrupting your day to day?

VILLA: And how it impacts your relationship with your friends, your family, your community, your working relationships. And then if you get into a little bit more behavioral processing, well, what will you - what are you going to do next with this information?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MENDOZA: Grisell is taking all the information she's learning and changing things up. She has a new job in DEI and feels relieved to have left her other position and be working for a community-centered organization. She's also leaning into therapy. She was prepared for it. She was a little too prepared for it.

VALENCIA: There's only so much you could read on Instagram and Psychology Today, right?

MENDOZA: She's been seeing her therapist for four months. That's the same person she found on the Therapy For Black Girls directory.

VALENCIA: Where it's like cognitive behavioral therapy. You know, I'm like, hey, do you do that little thing with the ball where I could stare at it? And she's like hypnosis? And I'm like, yeah. Because I'm thinking, what if I could just forget this shit, right? And she's like, we're not there yet. Because I've been researching and kind of, like, trying to "educate myself," quote-unquote, for the longest. And now I'm, like, a walking Instagram therapy meme, right? And she's kind of like bring it back.

MENDOZA: Edwin has been going to therapy for six months. He also has a new job as a social studies teacher at a special education school. He feels more supported in the work he plans to do for his students. He's reading books his therapist suggested, like "The Body Keeps The Score" and about trauma-informed education for students.

QUEZADA: And it would just be more like she's listening. And she's saying, hey, it's good. Like, there's other avenues that you can use. Like, go and become more independent. Do your own Instagram. Do your own groups outside of the school system. Go to another school. She advised me to go to other schools. Go to another district. So it gave me, like, a breather to say, hey, you know what? I'm not just stuck here. I could definitely go other places. And so she would just empower me in, like, in options and in trying to find more solutions and, like, other ways of doing it.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MENDOZA: So many of us have been looking for spaces to unpack anti-Blackness or racism. We looked for them in the pages of books, on social media accounts, in local BLM chapters or podcasts like CODE SWITCH. Another space that can be added to the mix can be therapy. But is therapy the end-all be-all? I don't think so. The purpose of therapy is to get us to experience ourselves - not necessarily our best selves but our most grounded selves - without having to defend who we are or be ashamed. And while on a personal level, it may be extremely enlightening and healing to examine our past and present, many have pointed out that therapy alone can't heal society. Yes, a lot of us could use therapy, but what our culture needs is a revolution.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MENDOZA: And that's our show. You can find more on our website, [npr.org/codeswitch](https://www.npr.org/codeswitch). This episode was reported by me, Isabeth Mendoza. It was

produced by Christina Cala and Jess Kung and edited by Christina with help from Steve Drummond and Leah Donnell. And, of course, shout out to the rest of the CODE SWITCH fam - Gene Demby, Karen Grigsby Bates, Kumari Devarajan, Alyssa Jeong Perry, Summer Thomad, LA Johnson and our intern, Nathan Pugh.

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(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

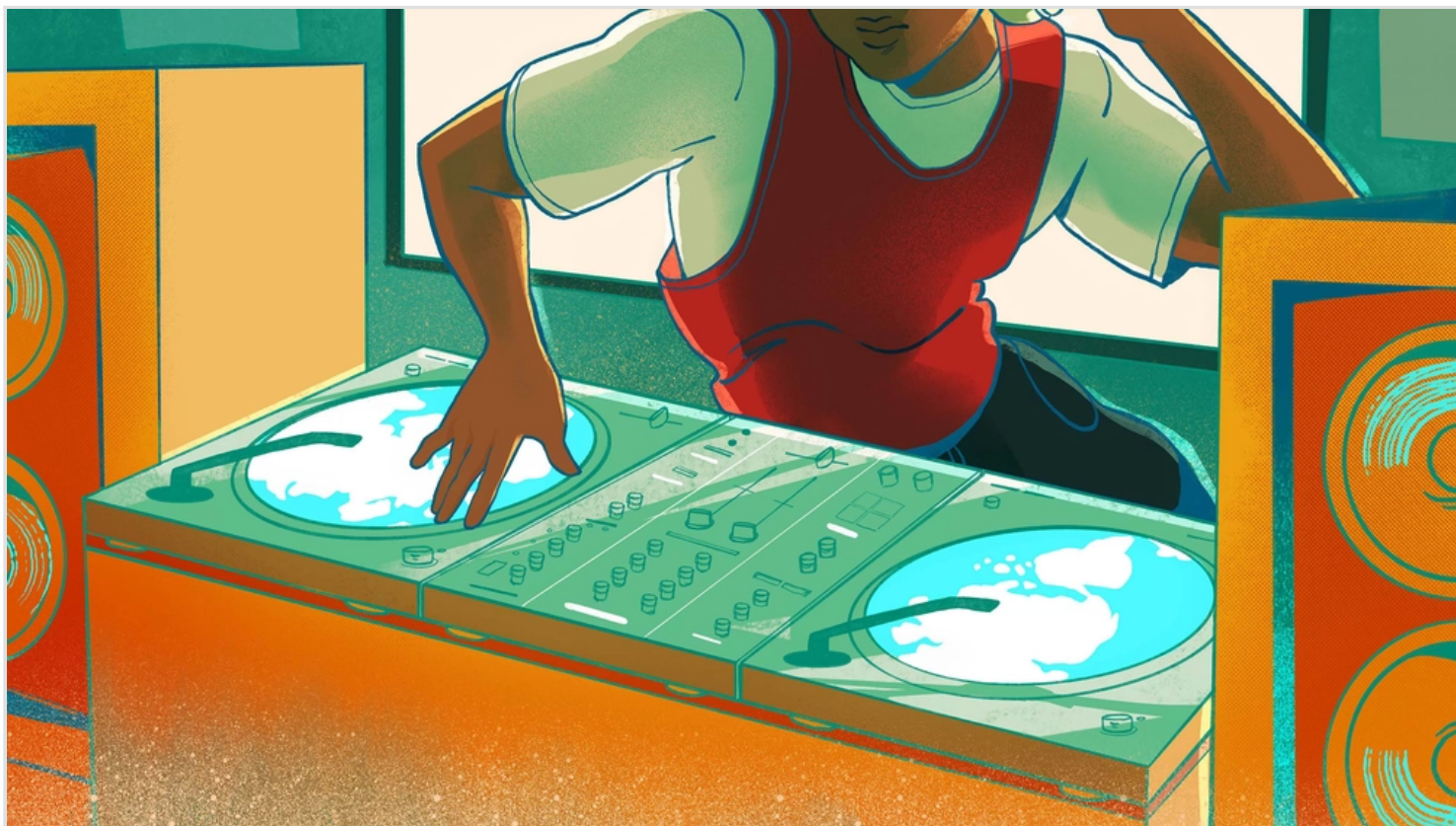
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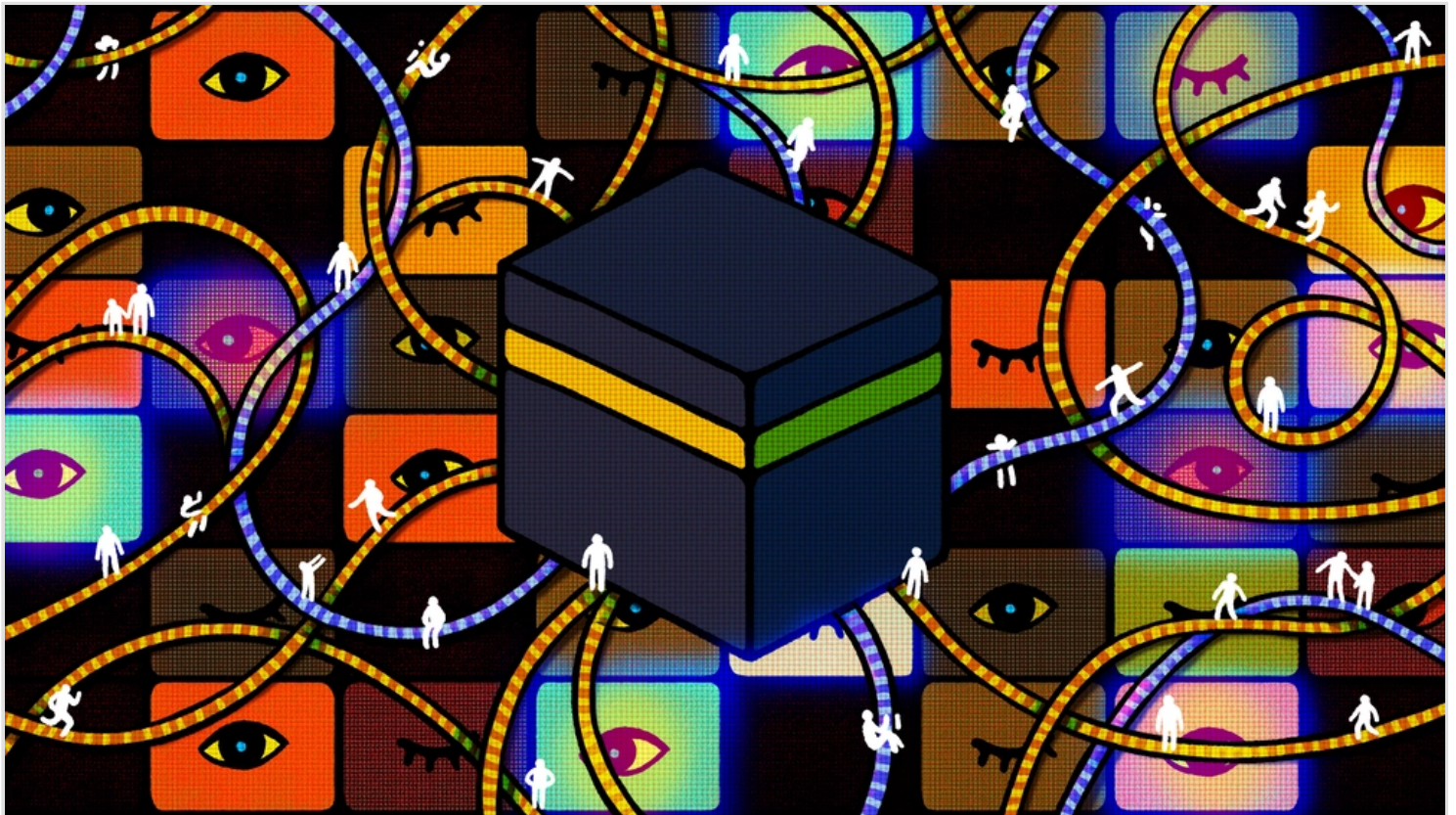
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