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Free to be Me

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According to press reports and our own correspondents, the white race is showing signs of fracture in the rural midwest. Several female students at North Newton Junior-Senior High School near Morocco, Indiana, who call themselves the “Free to Be Me” group, recently started braiding their hair in dreadlocks and wearing baggy jeans and combat boots, a style identified with Hip-Hop culture. Morocco is a small farming town seventy miles south of Chicago; of the 850 students at the school, two are black. Whites in the town accuse the group of “acting black,” and male students have reacted by calling them names, spitting at them, punching and pushing them into lockers, and threatening them with further violence. Since mid-November there have been death threats, a bomb scare, and a Ku Klux Klan rally at the school. “This is a white community,” said one sixteen-year old male student. “If they don’t want to be white, they should leave.”

Several of the Free to Be Me group told the story December 3 on the Montel Williams Show, a black-hosted TV talk show that comes out of New York and is aired nationally. After they returned to Indiana they were subjected to further harassment: four were suspended for refusing to remove their headbands, which are in

violation of the school's dress code, and more have left school because they feared for their safety. One said, "It's gotten to the point where you can't think in your classes because all you can think about is what they are going to do to you in the halls." One of the two black students in the school has been the target of threats and harassment since he started there; he has withdrawn from the school. His mother, who is not African-American, appeared on the show, her face covered with bruises, and reported that she was attacked by two white men while she was shopping in town.

On the day of the Klan rally, many students braided their hair and wore hand-lettered "Free to be Me buttons to school. There have also been rumors that black youth from other communities were coming to settle accounts.

"My girl was slammed in the face because her hair was in braids," said the mother of one thirteen-year old. This incident reveals, among other things, the tremendous power of crossover culture to undermine both white solidarity and male authority.