

# **BLUR**

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*“There was only one way to be Black in  
1985... and I wasn’t it.”  
- Makeba Roosevelt*

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## **Premise**

*BLUR is a show about the Black kids who rocked out to punk and stood in b-boy stances. In 1985 suburban NJ, two Black teenagers together navigate and reconcile their identities as they try to fit into worlds that are very black & white.*

## Show Summary

### What is BLUR?

Defining your identity in ninth grade is tough enough on its own... but doing it amidst a backdrop of two diametrically opposed worlds is a monumental challenge. *Blur* is set during the 1985-86 school year, before technology compressed the world and offered access into the full and unrestricted spectrum of Black culture. At Mitchell Junior High School, our Black protagonists Makeba and Smith have placed into honors (i.e., “white”) classes, which requires them to figure out how to remain whole while navigating between a fractured student community. ***Makeba questions the rules of Blackness, while Smith feels compelled to prove he fits within them.***

***BLUR is a show about the unwritten rules of Blackness.*** Before identity politics became part of the zeitgeist, starker boundaries meant trying to be Black in a way that wasn’t “typically Black,” equaled white, which equaled betrayal. It’s about Alfonso Ribeiro in *Silver Spoons*, or Dionne and Murray in *Clueless*, or wherever the Black kids were in ***Freaks and Geeks***. You know how many of your favorite high school series/movies had one or two Black student characters? This is their perspective... and they weren’t as happy as they looked, trust us.

***BLUR is a show about a changing world.*** 1985. Technology was expanding exponentially and the possibilities? Oh, the possibilities were delicious. Simultaneously, life was opening up and converging. Society was trying to define, or more accurately, redefine itself. The first .com was registered and the planet got smaller with enormously scaled shows like Live Aid, Farm Aid, and Comic Relief. We wanted to help more than just Jerry’s Kids and held hands across America while singing *We Are The World*. It was probably the generosity felt because we had our MTV and all that those videos promised. As the U.S. emerged from the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements of the 70’s and hit the gogo 80’s, we could feel something *big* was on the way. And although we didn’t always include everyone, that was about to change. At least that was the hope.

***BLUR is a show about identity.*** It’s about carrying a flag in a foreign land when you don’t always feel welcome back home. It’s about being asked to speak for an entire culture when that culture wonders how you were chosen to become its representative. It’s about testing the edges of Blackness until you expand the definition.

BLUR is a shout to the ***Black kids who rocked out to punk*** and still stood in b-boy stances, who navigated whiteness from such a young age that they became fluent in another language, who never forgot where they came from even in a world full of mirages, who learned to *present a palatable Blackness yet seasoned all the same*. We’ve seen the fish out of water stories, but ***Makeba and Smith know how to swim and dodge the sharks AND the fishermen.***

High schoolers find it easiest to mold their identities around their favorite artists, teams, movies... about who and what and how they love. Best friends, first relationships, crushes unrequited. Finding someone who relates to your struggles can provide a handhold amid the

maelstrom. Makeba and Smith are building their identities – together – based on different types of love.

***BLUR is a show about love.*** It's about a love of music. And while we didn't create a soundtrack to this show, music is how we related to a lot of the characters. Music **is** the language of youth and in the mid 80's hip-hop was blossoming, and alt rock was emerging. CDs were just coming out, and that meant no more jumping over the sofa to hit "record" on a cued up tape deck when your song came on the radio. That was the OG *like* and *repost*. The 80s were the mixtape's heyday. Makeba, Smith and everyone around them *love* music. It influences them down to a cellular level. BLUR is also about Black love. We wanted to show how Black people struggled and thrived to love themselves (and each other) in a world before crossover was king. Both Makeba and Smith come from two parent households. It was important for us to normalize parents in love and families in love, plain and simple. There's also the love they cultivate for one another. We watch two young Black teenagers truly begin to see themselves because they recognize their experiences in each other. Much of this validation is unspoken, but palpable, and manifests into a relationship built in frustration, anger, lust, and an intimacy deeper than either could express, especially when they're not speaking (again).

BLUR, above all, is a letter to the younger self. It is a look back with compassion, and a little embarrassment. This isn't a comedy, but there are parts that will make you laugh out loud. It's not a drama but you will feel for the characters. It's not a wink wink, nudge nudge to the 80's, it is the 80's. It's a look at the boxes people are forced into and how those lines are blurred through intention, through invention, through mishaps, and through evolution. We didn't create this show to answer questions about how to be Black because that question either has no answer, or it has every answer. We created this show to depict the challenges of crafting your own identity independent of the world around you, and how those challenges become easier when someone has your back.

What follows is a description of Smith and Makeba's journey and the people connected to it. We hope you enjoy the trip.

# The Characters

## Makeba Roosevelt

Age 14

Birthday: May 5

Birthplace: Princeton, NJ

Siblings - Makeba has a six year old sister named Brooke.

Makeba's parents were young, educated, ambitious, and wanted nothing but the best for their daughter when she was born in 1971. The world felt *possible*. She explained that she was named after Miriam Makeba to various white people over the years because being Black in the 70s in a white suburb meant that your existence was questioned. "*What kind of name is Makeba? I've never heard of that singer?!*" Raised to be proud of her heritage, Makeba's house was filled with books about MLK, Malcolm X, and art, music and stories about the civil rights movement. This sense of pride also meant Makeba needed to look right and talk right at all times. A look that was "street" would **not** have been okay. Makeba's dad even yelled at her once for talking with a valley girl accent saying that she shouldn't bring "street talk" in the house. And yet... she would sneak and listen to her parents' Richard Pryor album and couldn't believe they owned something that had the N-word!!

Music fuels Makeba. She has a taste for music that is very sophisticated for her age. She can get down with pop, but her parents' taste for good music has also influenced her. This is part of what makes her cool but she thinks it makes her stick out, which means loser. Makeba openly complains to her parents about their music but often listens to it later memorizing the liner notes. Keeba is most likable in the moments that she thinks she's unlikable. We see this in her interactions with Smith.

Makeba is furious when her parents move her in the middle of the school year. Her new school doesn't agree with her. Actually, her old school didn't agree with her either, but she learned to manage. The day before the move, a nine year old boy from across the street wrote NIGER in front of her house in chalk. Makeba was confused when she first saw it, wondering if the kid thought that's where they were from.

There's a longing about her that feels both cringy and relatable. She's unabashedly a teenager until she's not. There are moments when she displays a stunning insight that's wise beyond her years. In the pilot she is humiliated when a white boy doesn't want to kiss her because he thinks she's gross. She handles it with an outward dignity but is secretly crushed. Makeba wants nothing more than to be kissed by a cute boy and fall madly in love like in Judy Blume's Tiger Eyes. But she's not going all the way because that seems terrifying.

She dresses in a way that most of the white kids think is cool, but it's really because her mother has great taste. If it were up to her she'd wear the same old stuff that everyone else wears. This is her experience - she knows she wants more and is afraid to express it, but her mother's



powerful maternal influence masks that insecurity. Her clothes are WASPy and preppy with a sense of style. Makeba adopts the attitude of the clothes she wears, giving her an outward confidence. This throws Makeba into popular social circles even though she feels like a total outsider. She spends most of her days at school thinking one thing and saying something else literally at the same time.

Most Black kids make fun of Makeba because she “talks white” and dresses “weird”. Makeba thinks shell toe Adidas are weird and does not get the appeal of Kangols. White kids become her social group, which means she has to endure racist knock knock jokes and then assurances that they’re not talking about her because she’s not really Black. Makeba knows she’s Black, she doesn’t resent it or wish she wasn’t (well, maybe not anymore). She does wish that it was cool for her to love Tears for Fears and be Black. She is always talking about the group General Public because one of the singers is Black and that gives her a sense of validation. It’s not that she doesn’t like anything that is considered Black, but why does she have to prove it all the time? Sometimes the supposed Black experience (listening only to Rap and R&B) is so limiting. She doesn’t talk like that, she doesn’t act like that, and so what that she thinks that George Michael is sexier than Michael Jackson? And while a LOT of the Black kids think she’s weird, she may not always be the outcast she thinks she is...

Makeba navigates a lot of the frustration of her adolescence by reading and hiding out in her music. She is an avid reader. When she was little and bored, her mother would say ‘Boring people are always bored, go read a book.’

## **Smith Davidson**

Age 14

Birthday- October 31

Birthplace- Trenton, NJ

Siblings: Smith has a 10 year old brother named Edward.

As a kid, Smith was teased for being “white” by the neighborhood kids, all of whom were darker skinned than him. He wasn’t white (although his great grandfather was), wasn’t even “mixed” (their second favorite designation for him), but his light complexion, hazel eyes, and curly brown hair sometimes made it hard for him to argue otherwise.

Smith was always shorter than most kids his age, which also led to teasing, and even worse, the dreaded “little brother” designation from all the girls. Previously reluctantly accepted since it at least resulted in occasional hugs, this designation is no longer cool as his thoughts regarding the girls at school can no longer be described as “brotherly.” To his relief, he’s grown some recently, but is still on the short side.

These two major insecurities fuel Smith’s constant need to prove his manhood and his Blackness – to others and to himself – but he feels like he doesn’t know all the rules or where to learn them. He doesn’t trust his own experience as authentically Black (although neither of his

parents seem to struggle with their identities). He's from a solid middle class background, so his family's financial standing contributes to his hesitance, as well.

Smith is the oldest of two siblings, so there's no one to show him the ropes, so to speak. He grew up with a core group of Black friends that has his back, but he can't exactly admit his racial confusion to them. Smith often feels like he's on the outskirts of Blackness... he kinda knows what clothes he should be wearing, but has no idea where to purchase them. And if he's lucky enough to find something cool, it's often too big to fit him properly. He's not on the basketball or football teams, so he doesn't gain that cultural cachet. His friends' radios seem to be able to pick up the New York radio station KISS 98.7 to tape DJ Red Alert and hear the newest rap songs, but his only gets static.

Even Smith's talents conspire against him in this regard... he's fairly smart, smart enough to be the only Black kid in the AP/Honors classes (until Makeba arrives), so he spends much of the school day away from his crew. He's a decent athlete but he's best at soccer; his Black friends used to play as well but they eventually switched to basketball or football. (He was never really interested in playing basketball when he was young because of his size, and his slightly amused father politely but firmly declined his request to try out for the ninth grade football team.) Girls think his hair is cute, but he misses out on barbershop talk because he gets his hair cut by either the Italian dude his dad knows in Trenton or his mom's white friend who owns a salon, which isn't exactly a hot spot for Black teens.

So Smith has to make his moments count – in the elective classes that are more diverse, at lunch, in gym, on the school bus, and hanging out after school. When necessary, he enters unfamiliar Black spaces on the coattails of his friends... he meets people through them, their co-sign affords him credibility until he can slowly and carefully develop his own. His identity is built around fitting in. He has a good sense of humor and he's deferential... likely to a fault, but it's part of his built-in survival mechanism that he's developed over time. He stays quiet and humble, listens and absorbs information. He's always ready to laugh at people's jokes, and bides his time to strategically slip in comments about sports or music or TV shows or movies just to show people he's not what they may have thought he was. He disarms potential attacks before they happen, he makes people comfortable, he adjusts to them. This process fortunately works with both his groups of Black and white friends. He's interacted with white kids through school and sports all his life, so he's not uncomfortable around them.

Smith feels like he always has to perform... he can't just be.

To further complicate things, he grew up in the Baptist church, and his spiritual beliefs guide his actions. Smith doesn't curse or drink, even as his friends are starting to do both more and more. He really intends to wait until marriage to have sex, although Lisa Lisa, Janet Jackson, Alyssa Milano, and Lisa Bonet have begun to seriously weaken his resolve.

Smith is a bit naïve, and too trusting. He's overly competitive and can get jealous, even (especially?) of his own friends. He secretly resents how easy they seem to have it, with all their

height and melanin and coolness. He's a major procrastinator, often doing his homework in the class before it's due, but he can usually get away with it.

A voracious reader, he collects comic books... his favorites are the team books like the Avengers or the Justice League of America. He loves rap but his favorite group is New Edition... he wants to be Michael Bivins. He doesn't need it all, doesn't have to be the lead singer, he's kinda soft spoken, but he's part of the group and he's the one that everybody seems to think is cool. Nobody would question how Black Mike is, you know?

## **OTHER CHARACTERS**

**Claire:** She's a deadhead and shockingly self possessed for a teenager. Maybe it's her big brain, maybe it's the weed. She and Makeba meet on the bus ride home and become best friends (although they are close, Keeba keeps her at arm's length). Claire wants to be an astronaut and is so sure she's going to be one she plans on applying to one school, MIT. Claire is the kind of person who hates bullies but has a blind spot to her family's racist attitudes. While they seem to like Makeba, a lot of it has to do with the fact that she's a good one. Claire invites Makeba to a party and the Queen Bee of their class makes fun of Makeba. Claire plots revenge. But does Makeba need a savior?

**Claire's sister:** Insecure. Curates her playlist based on what other people were listening to.

**Alton:** Smith's super-ego. Alton is an old soul in a ninth grade body... he speaks, moves, and thinks slowly and with purpose. He's often hesitant, worried about the most remote worst case scenarios possible. But just when you think he's completely out of touch, Alton drops wisdom that changes your whole perspective. He's the one who makes Smith look both ways before crossing.

**Derek:** Smith's id. If Alton is saying look both ways before crossing, Derek is already in the middle of the road daring cars to hit him. "D" is loud, obnoxious, arrogant, and everything Smith wishes he was brave enough to be. He's tall, hilarious, and foul-mouthed... he's also a preacher's son, which intrigues Smith to no end. Smith sometimes doesn't even understand why Derek likes him, but he's so glad Derek is for him rather than against.

**Jeff:** Smith's homeboy from day one. They met in kindergarten and have called themselves cousins ever since. Jeff is truly liked by everyone in the school. He's a good athlete, always up on the latest songs and clothes, and LOVES to be out of the house. The only thing he loves more is dragging Smith out to accompany him. Smith complains but knows deep down that he relies heavily on Jeff (and his popularity); sometimes it feels like he's met and been accepted by most people through Jeff's co-sign.

**Kayla:** She's the white girl who wishes she was Black as long as she can keep her privilege. She has a crush on Jack who doesn't really know she exists beyond the fact that she lives in the apartments near his neighborhood. She resents Makeba's ability to be Black and different.

**Jack:** The cute popular white boy in school who has a crush on Makeba. He's #2 on the Top 9 in 9th (white version). No. 1 is Tom Cruise. Smith and Jack play soccer together, and Jack is Smith's "best white mate." Smith likes his cool confidence, and apparently so does Makeba, which complicates Smith and Jack's friendship.

**Mara:** She's mean, probably because her parents are mean and she doesn't have anywhere to put those feelings. Because she's desperate and kinda cute she clings onto her privilege like the latest Benetton sweater. She pretends to like Makeba but doesn't.

**Trina:** Takes no shit from anyone. Her tough exterior hides a desire for a more stable life. She has a mother who loves her and works 2 jobs to make sure she has everything she needs. Trina doesn't have it figured out but is smart enough to know her friend group can help her make her wildest lol dreams come true. Trina's a lyricist whose words cut almost as deep as the switchblade that's always in her pocket. She'd never use it, but no one needs to know that.

**Andrew:** The only gay kid who was out in high school. Grace Jones is his spirit animal. His best friend is Trina. Andrew doesn't struggle to fit in, there's a sense that he is the keeper of a lot of secrets. The knowledge he carries offers protection.

**Knowledge/Kenneth:** The leader of the Mitchell JHS five percent nation sect who is not at all impressed with Smith's suburban, light-skinned life. He's on the basketball team with Smith's crew, so their social circles interact frequently; he's also the cousin of Smith's longtime crush, unfortunately. Smith is no fan of his, either, but envies his unquestionable Blackness. Their constant clashes are ironic, considering they have a shared past that neither of them reference anymore.

**Naima:** Clearly and utterly beyond the entire concept of high school, she's the smartest one in her above average class. When Smith asks her why she isn't in the "smart" classes, she replies, "Why? So I can struggle? I can get straight A's in these classes and still hang out all weekend. I can get into the University of Chicago without AP English." She's so damn cool that even the teachers give her a nod in the hallways. She takes pity on Smith when he wants to get on the list. Although she'd never admit it, she's always thought that he was cool; they go way back to elementary school days and she adores his mother. She knows better than anyone that it takes guts to balance AP life with the neighborhood.

**Diana (Flygirl):** The black princess of Mitchell JHS and every guy's desire. Homegirls with Naima. She may actually think Smith is cute?

**Linda and Eugene Roosevelt (Makeba's parents):** They met at a HBCU in the late 60s, both politically active and eager to make their marks on the world. Linda is a stay at home mom with impeccable taste, who is fit, well-read and steeped in her history. Though she was marching in the streets to 'Free Angela Davis' she appreciates what being upwardly mobile can provide. Her existence sends mixed messages to Makeba and her siblings... there seems to be an idea of

what being the “right” kind of Black person looks like. Makeba’s mom talks about racism and white people a lot but doesn’t want the stereotypes of Blackness impacting her or her family. Eugene is brilliant, quiet and powerful. He’s intimidating to Makeba’s friends and he likes it that way, but on the inside he’s always smiling. He is Makeba’s standard for how she sees boys. He is her hero. Makeba looks at them both like they are movie stars; they were the Cosby Show before it premiered. They have provided a wonderful world for Makeba even if it sometimes feels contradictory. Eugene and Linda challenge each other because iron sharpens iron and their door is often locked on the weekends because they still make magic. Black love before the hashtag.

**Steve and Vicki Davidson (Smith’s parents):** Steve and Vicki Davidson have been married for 18 years, and Smith has watched Steve kiss Vicki on the lips upon coming home from work every day for as long as he can remember. Steve is a middle school principal... he is cool, wickedly funny, humble, and not much of a talker, which he shares in common with Smith. They also share a love of sports, so they can sit together and watch a game in silence and be perfectly happy. Vicki, however, does enough talking for all of them. She is a beloved elementary school teacher, and has quite frankly paved the way for Smith’s acceptance in junior high because so many of his fellow students love his mother and often tell him she was their favorite teacher. She is caring and very spiritual... her beliefs resonate with Smith and serve as an example for him. She struggles with lung issues and related health challenges at times. As they are both educators, they highly value academics and set high expectations for Smith and his younger brother, but they also support and encourage interests and activities outside of school. They are not overly strict but certainly do not suffer fools, gladly or otherwise. They are both extremely comfortable in their own skin; Smith doesn’t discuss his issues with proving Blackness because he doesn’t think they would relate (plus they’re both darker than him). They provide a warm and loving home for Smith and his brother, and a relationship example that Smith has internalized, whether he realizes it or not.

**Mr. Bartlett:** Algebra teacher. One of the few Black (and the only Black male) Teachers at Mitchell JHS. He takes an interest in helping Black students succeed.

**Ms. Patruski:** A white teacher in her 60s who understands the legacy of slavery and the current system of racism. She was a Freedom Rider. She’s rare. Especially in 1985. Especially in the middle of New Jersey.

**Mr. Patterson:** He’s the soccer coach and teaches a social studies class. He’s insightfully sober but even more so when he’s drunk, which is most of the time.

# Story World

We don't name the town specifically, but it is Ewing Township, New Jersey. It's smack in the middle of NJ right between Trenton, the predominantly Black and poor state capital, and Princeton, one of NJ's richest towns and home to Princeton University. Proximity to these borders matters in the show and sets a tone. Closer to the Princeton side, the houses are bigger; it's flanked to the west by the Delaware River and there is a golf club. But it's not Princeton and the folks on that side have their own identity crisis and call it MountainView, named after the golf course. Closer to the state's Capitol or the Trenton side, the area is middle class, working class, and lower working class. The town's center is the most diverse area. The town has all the requisite NJ establishments -- 5 pizza joints, a few Chinese restaurants, three strip malls complete with video rental stores, a couple bowling alleys, a Carvel ice cream shop, a VFW, and of course a diner (that has the best fries).

It's a town in decline but doesn't know it yet. The closure of an auto parts factory that was thriving until the 70s created a bit of white flight. There's not much in the way of "nightlife," other than a couple of the pizza places staying open late, so the students have to make their own fun.

Demographics: 75% white, 24% Black.

Education: The HS is ranked at low end.\*

## Primary Story World

**Mitchell JHS:** The school has grades 7-9 and is one of the last schools in NJ to do this. This is the last year that 9th graders will be at the junior high. The facilities are average, some of the teachers are above average. The school feels like it's just about to be out of date, but isn't yet. There is a lot of care invested, though. Bleachers are always painted, the gym floor has a shine and classrooms are filled with all inspirational posters a parent would love to see. Much of the show will happen in classrooms (Mr. Patterson, Ms. Patruski and Mr. Barnett), the cafeteria, gym, and the school pickup/dropoff zone. The student population is fairly diverse with an approximately 60/40 split between white and black; there are a little over 200 ninth graders.

**Makeba's home:** Makeba's home is beautifully decorated. Linda has an effortless eye, giving Martha Stewart a run for her money. The Roosevelts' house is large but not ostentatious. However, there's a sense that this is the last stop for them.

**Smith's home and bus stop:** Smith's home is solidly middle-class. He and his brother each have their own room, and there is an inground pool in the backyard. The house is decorated with lots of artwork (much of it done by Smith's mother) and there is a piano in the living room. Smith's dad has a small refrigerator in the den where he keeps his beer for watching games. They live in a diverse neighborhood... most of Smith's childhood friends are a bike ride away.

Smith catches the bus at the last stop before school. The stop is at the corner of a main thoroughfare and a side street in front of McArthur's Deli.

**The bus:** Smith's bus is mostly filled with Black students. The bus driver likes him and will wait for him if she drives by Smith walking to the stop. It's usually filled with the sounds of raucous laughter and the music from someone's box in the back... sometimes the kids will sing or rap along.

**The deli:** Students often gather there while waiting for the bus... sometimes they even buy something. And when they do, they may happen to throw the wrappers from their pork roll, egg and cheese sandwiches on the ground instead of in the trash can. The owner is not particularly thrilled with this arrangement, and is less than friendly with the Black students in particular. He is the father of one of Smith's white classmates and soccer teammates.

*\*Many parents send their kids to parochial school in and around neighboring towns. A few send their kids to more exclusive private schools in Princeton and across the river in Pennsylvania. An interesting note about Makeba's parents here -- in spite of their growing success and ambition, they were intentional about not sending Makeba to private school. They didn't want her turning into a snob, and yet subtly turned their noses up at certain kinds of folks even if not stating it outright.*

# Season One Overview

In season one we meet Makeba and Smith and are introduced to their respective and combined worlds. Makeba is transferring to Mitchell Junior High School during the 1985-86 school year where Smith is trying to navigate the 9th grade. After being tricked into believing he was named to a list of the coolest Black kids in school, Smith becomes determined to make the list by any means. Meanwhile, Makeba is trying to forget the pain caused at a party in her old town but finds herself in a similar situation. While she longs for Black friends who get her, she ends up with a circle of friends who are mostly white, the hazard of living in the suburbs of NJ in the 80s. Smith is navigating his identity from the other end of the spectrum, as he fights to prove his Blackness even while surrounded by mostly Black friends.

**Pilot:** “Roxanne (Roxanne?!)”

**Cold open Teaser**

**A montage of all things 1985 (The first Mac, Live Aid, Benetton ads, Rap music, Valley Girls, Preppy kids, MTV. From the astronaut on the moon from the MTV promo we are in space looking at the earth. Zooming closer to the earth and seeing the US, we zoom into the state of NJ and hold a beat and finally zoom to a young girl’s bathroom where we meet MAKEBA ROOSEVELT.**

FLASHBACK of a recent party. A bunch of 14 year olds are playing Seven Minutes in Heaven. The names chosen are Makeba and a white boy named Pete. Makeba is excited, Pete is not. Pete says that he doesn’t want to make out with a Black girl. Makeba’s BFF annoyingly talks over the flashback and is completely oblivious to Makeba’s pain about the incident even though she could see the look on Makeba’s face when she walked out of the closet. Part of this is because she’s a teenager, part of it is blind privilege. Makeba half-heartedly pretends that she’ll stay in touch. Her friend doesn’t register that Makeba is angry, sad, and has no intention of staying in touch; there’s a sense that this happens a lot. Mary gives Makeba a friendship bracelet. As the car drives off, we see the bracelet fly out of the window. Makeba pats her giant dog on the head.

Smith gets the phone call he’s always dreamed of receiving... the notice that he’s been named to the Top 9 in 9th, the list of the coolest Black kids in school. He tells his parents (who aren’t impressed) and his little brother (who doesn’t believe him). He wants to tell his longtime crush Nikki as they walk to the bus stop, but decides to wait for the reveal at school in hopes that she will change her mind about becoming his girlfriend once she sees the reaction. Smith meets his friends Jeff and Alton at the deli across the street from the bus stop. Visually, Smith is the odd man out – they’re all on the basketball team and he is shorter and lighter than everyone. Another Black student (“Knowledge”/Kenneth) performs his usual mocking of Smith by calling him “lite brite” and questioning how he dresses and acts. His friends tell him all that will change because of the list.

In the car Makeba looks in the mirror. Makeba is dressed very preppy and thinks she looks cute. She’s pissed at her parents for moving in the middle of the school year. “Everything’s already



settled,” she says to her mother as she heads to her first day at Mitchell Junior High School. “Junior High? What crap town has 9th grade in junior high? It’s like, being left back.” Makeba’s mother responds as she always does, with a reference about the Civil Rights Movement. “Please. You’ll survive. Imagine if all Black people thought that. Do some *unsettling*.” She follows up the harsh pep talk with a loving hug and Makeba is strengthened. She walks inside, terrified but feeling strong. There are more Black kids than she’s ever seen. This is unexpected. None of them are dressed like her. EVERYONE stares. Makeba trips and a white girl standing with a group of girls who are Black snickers loudly.

Makeba leaves the principal’s office with books and an attitude because this school seems like bullshit compared to her old school. Walking down an empty hallway she is serenaded by a Black kid who raps Roxanne by U.T.F.O. When Makeba comments that’s not how The Police sing it, he expresses curiosity, immediately followed by disappointment. “Where the fuck you from?” She is not going to like it here.

Smith watches Nikki dance to LL Cool J on the bus ride to school and lies to his friends about their relationship. Upon arriving, he and his crew triumphantly stroll to see the posted “Black list.” At the top of the list is Donna (a.k.a Flygirl), the dream (Black) girl of the school, his former best friend/now queen-of-all-things Naima, his buddies Jeff and Derek, Nikki, and even Knowledge... but not Smith.

#### **END ACT ONE**

Stunned and embarrassed by the prank, Smith lashes out at Nikki, who ends up leaving with Knowledge. Smith becomes determined to get on the list to prove his Blackness and his manhood to everyone. Smith asks Naima for help with making the list, but she is above such foolishness and rejects him. He eventually goes to his second choice, the irrepressible Derek, whose immediate advice is to “get these hoes.”

Once school starts, Smith’s environment changes drastically, as he leaves his friends to attend his classes which are primarily populated by white students. Smith meets new student Makeba in his favorite AP English, where she immediately doubles the number of Black students in the class. He’s still dazed by the morning’s events, but can’t deny a connection to her, even more so when she easily matches wits with him. The teacher mentions that he can help catch her up with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which gives Smith an idea for swaying his crush. He empathizes when Makeba’s perfect score on the pop quiz throws off the curve and earns the class’s scorn, so he shows her some support.

**MAKEBA’S POV:** Makeba stumbles into her AP English class. Class has started and she drops everything. Makeba fights back tears and looks at a quote on her notebook from her favorite band. “My life’s like a button, I can’t stop pushing it.” Makeba meets Smith, the only other Black kid in class. There are sparks until the teacher proclaims that he’s the best writer in class and maybe he can help Makeba get up to speed with a *Midsummer’s Night Dream*. Smith smiles impishly. She remarks smugly that she read it last year. A white kid elbows Smith and makes a comment about how they should hook up. They both get uncomfortable. She likes him instantly but isn’t sure he likes her. There’s a pop quiz. Makeba takes it. Smith doesn’t have a pen, again.

Makeba loans him one, their fingers touch. Smith is inspired. At the same time Makeba meets Jack, the coolest white kid in the 9th grade who is immediately smitten with Makeba. He comes to her rescue at lunch.

With Derek's advice ringing in his ear, Smith writes a poem for Nikki with a mix of Shakespeare and LL Cool J and performs it for her in the middle of gym class. The class likes it but she doesn't appreciate the public display and tries to walk away. Smith persists, which ends in Nikki pushing him down and saying loudly she's "not going with no little white boys." The class erupts in screams and laughter. Smith is "crush"-ed. Naima watches the entire scene from a distance, as she has somehow secured an excuse to never participate in gym because she doesn't unnecessarily sweat. Knowledge cackles, and Smith lunges at him, convinced he orchestrated the prank and probably even Nikki's dismissal.

Arriving in their neighborhood looks and feels like a different world; this is the "rich" part of town. Jack walks her home, talks music with her, and realizes that she's cool. And pretty. He likes her. He asks if she's ever gone out with a white guy. He follows up a compliment by asking her if she likes Smith. He says she and Smith are cute together and should go out. Jack offers to talk to Smith for her though she didn't ask for help. Makeba is confused.

## **END ACT TWO**

On the way home from soccer practice, Smith's mom tells him she will need his help again entertaining the kids brought by the women who will be attending his mom's bible study at their house that night. Smith asks why her Christian friends all have little bad kids that are definitely going to hell. He considers unburdening to his mom but doesn't. Rather, Smith asks Naima again for help; she finally agrees since she owes him, and says she has an idea. Smith later opens the door with kids hanging all over him as a new bible study participant arrives, along with her daughter, who turns out to be Flygirl. Upon entering, Donna says to Smith's mom that she didn't know she had such a cute son. Smith is flabbergasted.

Makeba has dinner with her family, then cleans the kitchen while the family dog lays on the floor keeping her company. Makeba's little sister drops wisdom while laying on the floor with the dog. A storm approaches and a rain soaked Jack appears in her window determined to win her affection.

**Pilot** - We're introduced to Smith, Makeba and the cast. Makeba moves to a new town and deals with adjusting while Smith contends with not being on the Top 9 of 9th List. Smith and Makeba meet. Makeba meets and has a crush on Jack, the coolest white kid in the 9th grade. Smith loses a long time love but gains a potential new one.

**Episode 2** - Makeba has a crush that likes her and is confronted with racism when the police pull her father over on the way home. A school bully makes her life miserable. Smith joins a prestigious academy for students of color and is confronted by a girl gang.

**Episode 3** - Smith and Makeba attend a mock senate committee hearing in DC and realize that there are romantic sparks between them. They become allies amidst a sea of whiteness.

**Episode 4** - Makeba and Smith fall deeper into their respective relationships, but keep getting closer as they work together on an article for the school paper. They have another moment when a party they attend gets broken up by the cops and they have to figure out a way home.

**Episode 5** - Makeba goes to the salon to get her hair done and spends the night at Claire's. Makeba gets in trouble at school and has to spend time with her nemesis. Smith tries to reconcile newfound attention and conflicting advice from his Academy mentor and his parents while navigating his temporary entrance into the Black upper crust.

**Episode 6** - Smith and Makeba pair up as they work with Knowledge, Trina, Naima and Andrew to present at a Black History Month assembly. Makeba and Jack deal with their differences. Makeba looks to Smith for support, and Smith questions how much support he should give.

**Episode 7** - Jesse Jackson's son comes to the school to talk about Civic Engagement. When a classmate of Smith and Makeba asks a racist question a brawl breaks out. Makeba and Smith are forced to choose sides. Makeba's family adopts a dog that bites Jack. Makeba talks to her visiting grandfather. Smith, Makeba, and Jack are assigned a group project at the absolute worst time. Smith finally appears on the list, but begins to view it differently.

**Episode 8** - Makeba realizes that she's fallen for Smith. Claire gets back at a racist classmate (Mara) and Makeba is angry that her white friend thinks that someone needs to fight her battles for her. Makeba is frustrated with everyone and everything and takes off on her bike to the next town where she is enthralled... temporarily. Emotions are still high from the school brawl, and Smith argues with the deli owner at the bus stop. He vows to make things right with his friends, and begins to plot on tearing the whole list system apart. At the Galveston Business Academy, Smith has an interesting interaction with a guest speaker, who unbeknownst to him is Makeba's father.

**Episode 9** - Makeba goes to her first "woods party"; the neighborhood kids have a spot where they burn a fire and drink grain alcohol punch. At the party, Makeba meets a biracial kid who goes to private school. They immediately click and want to chat but resist it because they know all the white kids will say it's so cool that the two black kids like each other. Jack shows up and they have a fight that leads to a lot more. Smith deals with the ramifications of the deli incident with the owner's son in class. After getting caught in a compromising position with Flygirl, Smith's mom leaves a pamphlet about "petting" on his bed with a note asking if he wants to talk about it. He instead chooses to discuss sex and spirituality with Derek, the preacher's son. He also asks Makeba's advice, which leads to a long overdue talk.

**Episode 10** - Prom. Everything begins and ends.

## Future Seasons

There's a lot to continue to explore with Makeba, Smith and their friends in future seasons. As the world continues to shift and change, so do they. Globally the world continues to get small with the Berlin Wall falling. MTV becomes the voice of a generation. Black 'culture' starts to become mainstream beyond athletes thanks to the Cosby Show and filmmakers like Spike Lee. All of these things impact our characters and we see how they continue to navigate their identities.

Smith becomes more comfortable with himself and moves from trying to prove his blackness to trying to prove that his way is just as black as anyone else's.

Makeba continues to question the definition of what it means to be Black and pushes boundaries. She continues to seek a variety of friends but encounters issues when she wants to bring those worlds together.

Their tangled love lives continue to bring challenges, whether it's Smith secretly dating a white girl for the first time or Makeba ending up in a relationship with Smith's friend Jeff. Still, they can't seem to shake one another no matter how hard they try or how mad they get. To their frustration, they find they're forever linked and often become a topic of conversation in each other's relationships. And somehow they always seem to find their way back to one another in some form or fashion.