

# Hollywood's first major Black female superhero: How *Wakanda Forever* broke the mold

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[Black Panther: Wakanda Forever](#) rewrote Hollywood's script for superhero movies. English professor Diana Adesola Mafe was recently

*involved in an academic [roundtable](#) that offers a critical conversation about it and another film set in an African kingdom, [The Woman King](#).*

She [argues](#) that Wakanda Forever is a breakthrough film. We asked her why.

## **Why are these two films such talking points?**

As big budget productions with Black female heroes, The Woman King and Black Panther: Wakanda Forever invite discussion and debate about Hollywood representations of Africa and the kinds of roles that [women](#) and girls can and should play. They lend themselves to discussing topics ranging from the importance of historical accuracy to the power of imagining alternative histories and fantastical futures.

## **Why is Wakanda Forever important to you?**

One of my primary [research areas](#) is the representation of Black women in literature and popular culture. My 2018 [book](#) Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before: Subversive Portrayals in Speculative Film and TV is precisely about Black women in science fiction and fantasy roles. I am always on the look-out for films that push boundaries, challenge stereotypes, and put Black women at the center of the story.

Wakanda Forever does that by presenting a superhero action flick headlined by Black women. The film is set in the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda, where the people are mourning the death of their king and fighting to defend their land and resources, especially the powerful metal vibranium, from world powers.

It's the first Hollywood film to showcase Black female superheroes on such an epic scale, backed by a US\$250 million budget and the global

reach of a juggernaut like Marvel Studios. The [posters](#) alone tell viewers that this film is doing something different.

Of course the film is not perfect, and director [Ryan Coogler](#) has been [open](#) about the fact that he originally set out to make a completely different and male-centered film. The [untimely death](#) of the original Black Panther star Chadwick Boseman called for an overhaul of the script and the reveal of Shuri, played by [Letitia Wright](#), as the new Black Panther. But the film's production history does not change its status as a pioneer for Black female representation, especially in the genre of superhero cinema.

**You discuss 'the act of looking' in your paper. Tell us about that.**

One of the lasting presumptions of early Hollywood movies was that the audience was white. To put this another way, few film-makers were catering to Black viewers and fewer still imagined Black women as a primary audience. This has changed over time, but the notion of a default white male gaze both on and off screen often remains implicit in western cinema.

A film like *Wakanda Forever* is intentional about inviting Black spectatorship and showcasing Black women as active players who drive the plot and whose gazes are bold, instead of averted or downplayed. The Black female characters in the film constantly look back at the viewer by way of the camera, as well as at one another, defying a western cinematic tradition of marginalizing and objectifying Black women.

**Is Hollywood's diversity problem getting better or not really?**

The short answer is yes and no. If you consider that the US film industry goes back over a century, then yes, we're seeing more diversity in front of and behind the camera, not just in terms of race and gender but also ethnicity, sexuality, age, and so on. *Wakanda Forever* would have been an unlikely blockbuster or Oscar contender 20 or even 10 years ago. Thanks to the first [Black Panther](#) film, Hollywood is now aware that an all-Black superhero movie can gross over a billion dollars and win Academy Awards.

But the success of a single film or even a handful of films does not mean a wider shift in the industry. For example, Marvel just released [The Marvels](#), its first film by a Black female director, [Nia DaCosta](#), but that does not change the fact that Black women are underrepresented in the industry.

Organizations such as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences have [offered](#) new (and controversial) strategies and standards in terms of equity and access. Starting in 2024, films must meet diversity targets in areas like "on-screen representation, themes and narratives" and "audience development" to be eligible for an Oscar. And hashtags like [#OscarsSoWhite](#), as well as academic studies like the UCLA [Hollywood Diversity Report](#), continue to track progress but also ongoing challenges where Hollywood's diversity problem is concerned.

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