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Lupita Nyong'o accepts the award for best actress in a supporting role for "12 Years a Slave" during the Oscars Sunday in Los Angeles. The historical drama also won for best picture and for writing. (AP photo)

Diversity Wins at the Academy Awards

Black and Latino filmmakers earn top Oscar honors

(AP) - Diversity was perhaps the biggest winner at the 86th annual Academy Awards.

took best actor and best supporting actor titles for their roles in the film as a heterosexual rodeo rat (McConaughey) and a transgender drug addict (Leto) united by HIV.

"Thirty-six million people who have lost the battle to AIDS and to those of you out there who have ever felt injustice because of who you are or who you love, tonight I stand here in front of the world with you and for you," said Leto in his acceptance speech.

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For the first time, a film directed by a black filmmaker - Steve McQueen of "12 Years a Slave" - won best picture and a Latino - Alfonso Cuaron of "Gravity" took home best director in a ceremony presided over by a lesbian host and overseen by the academy's first black president. And only two of the top six awards went to Americans.

McQueen's grimly historical drama "12 Years a Slave" took best picture, leading the usually sedate filmmaker to jump up and down in celebration after his acceptance speech.

The British director dedicated his award to "all of the people who endured slavery and the 21 million people who still suffer slavery today."

Cuaron's lost-in-space thriller "Gravity" led the Oscars with seven awards, including cinematography, editing, score, visual effects, sound mixing and sound editing.

The entire Oscar ceremony had the feel of a makeover for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences - an institution that has sometimes seemed stuck in the past. After a Los Angeles Times report revealed the academy was overwhelming older white men, new president Cheryl Boone Isaacs has pushed for a more varied membership.

The movie industry that the Oscars reflect has also been reluctant to tell a wider range of stories.

"Dallas Buyers Club," the best picture-nominated drama about AIDS in 1980s Texas, took two decades to get made after countless executives balked at financing such a tale. Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto, the two Americans in the top six awards,

Cate Blanchett, the Australian best-actress winner for her bitter, ruined socialite in Woody Allen's "Blue Jasmine," used her acceptance speech to trumpet the need to make films with female leads - films like her own and like "Gravity," starring Sandra Bullock.

"12 Years a Slave" also won awards in the writing and acting categories. John Ridley picked up the trophy for best adapted screenplay, which was based on the 1853 memoir by Solomon Northup. The screenwriter is only the second black writer (Geoffrey Fletcher won for "Precious" in 2009) to win in the category. Backstage, the "12 Years" team mentioned their efforts to include Solomon Northup's memoir as part of high school study. The National School Boards Association announced in February that the book is now mandatory reading.

"It's important that we understand our history so we can understand who we were and who we are now and most importantly who we're going to be," said Brad Pitt, who produced "12 Years." "We hope that this film remains a gentle reminder that we're all equal. We all want the same: Dignity and opportunity."

Lupita Nyong'o was a first-time Oscar winner for her supporting role as field slave Patsey in "12 Years." "I'm a little dazed," said Nyong'o backstage. "I can't believe this is real life."

Nyong'o is the sixth black actress to win in the supporting actress category - and the first major Oscar win for Kenya (the president of Kenya congratulated her in a tweet) - following Hattie McDaniel ("Gone with the Wind"), Whoopi Goldberg ("Ghost"), Jennifer Hudson ("Dreamgirls"), Mo'Nique ("Precious") and Octavia Spencer ("The Help").