

# Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Our God Is Marching On": Rhetorical Analysis of the Speech behind the 1965 Voting Rights Act

Mouhamed DIOP

Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Avenue Cheikh Anta Diop, Po BOX: 5005, Dakar, Senegal  
Email: [mouhamed.rassoul\[at\]yahoo.fr](mailto:mouhamed.rassoul[at]yahoo.fr)

**Abstract:** *The Voting Rights Act of 1965 left an inefaceable inkblot in the history book of the United States of America, and especially that of African Americans. The signature of this historic act took shape after numerous battles against injustice. Several prominent African Americans raised their eloquent voices to lead these battles in dignity and self-respect. From these veterans, emerged Martin Luther King, Jr., a courageous and charismatic leader. No American remained indifferent to his great speeches, no matter what their religions or races. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the American moral voice of the 1950s and 1960s. His voice federalized the diverse groups into a melting pot, and made outspoken pleas of peace and justice everywhere. Great speeches travel through time and reach all generations because they have entered the immortal annals of history (Diop, 2024). In this paper, I will conduct a study on the oratory secrets behind King's great speech that contributed to making a U.S. president sign the decisive Voting Rights Act in 1965. This study will explore the rhetorical devices King used in his speech "Our God Is Marching On", which title has religious complexion, but which content is a tremendous learning experience. By analyzing King's power of language, I will both probe the historical background of all the ballot-related protests that led to this speech, and I will investigate the mechanisms that made this speech an American literature masterpiece.*

**Keywords:** 1965 Voting Rights Act, Martin Luther King, Jr., rhetorical devices, American literature.

## 1. Introduction

It is reasonable to both criticize the U.S. government and to defend it. On the one hand, with strong determination to end segregation and discrimination once for all, the U.S. government would have solved the race problem a century ago, even before King's birth. On the other, legal means of interposition and nullification by some southern States, the black codes and Jim Crow laws, and racism itself as an evil in hearts and minds, made it quasi-impossible for the federal government to take a final positive and firm decision about the black issue (Diop, 2024).

In his works, King evoked the problems of the U.S. federal power to enact laws that would be beneficial to every American citizen, with no exception. In his social action, it was for him a way to dramatize the situation through *pathos*, a realistic portrayal of the facts. This appears in articles and speeches such as "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," "The Current Crisis in Race Relations," "An Address Before the National Press Club," "The Case Against 'Tokenism'," "I Have a Dream," etc., in these words:

While southern legislative halls ring with open defiance through "interposition" and "nullification,"...

The recalcitrant forces authored such concepts as nullification and interposition, ...

The councils [White Citizens' Councils] had multiplied rapidly throughout the South, purporting to achieve their ends by the legal maneuvers of "interposition" and "nullification."

... with its governor [George Wallace or Ross Barnette] having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, ...

(King, 1991)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, enemies of social progress authorized the governments of the diverse Union States to interpose between the federal power and the population, and to nullify the Congress laws that were obviously prejudicial to local interests (King, 2013). But the dehumanizing concepts of interposition and nullification did not thrive before the application of slave codes and black codes. Slave codes are any of the sets of rules based on the concept that enslaved persons were property, not persons. These laws aimed to protect not only the property but also the property owner from the danger of slave violence during colonial America (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).

After the Civil War ended in 1865, black codes and Jim Crow laws were passed at different periods in the southern United States to enforce racial segregation and curtail the power of black voters (National Geographic Society, 2023). In his speech "Our God Is Marching On", King uses *logos*, a rhetorical device to reason his white audience. In so doing, he delves into the populist movement that was a politically oriented coalition of agrarian reformers in the Midwest and South. The populist movement advocated a wide range of economic and political legislations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). King behaves like a lecturer in this passage:

Toward the end of the Reconstruction era, something very significant happened. That is what was known as the Populist Movement. The leaders of this movement began awakening the poor white masses and the former Negro slaves to the fact that

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they were being fleeced by the emerging Bourbon interests [conservative Democrats who reacted against Reconstruction]. Not only that, but they began uniting the Negro and white masses into a voting bloc that threatened to drive the Bourbon interests from the command posts of political power in the South.

To meet this threat, the southern aristocracy began immediately to engineer this development of a segregated society. I want you to follow me through here because this is very important to see the roots of racism and the denial of the right to vote. Through their control of mass media, they revised the doctrine of white supremacy. They saturated the thinking of the poor white masses with it, thus clouding their minds to the real issue involved in the Populist Movement. They then directed the placement on the books of the South of laws that made it a crime for Negroes and whites to come together as equals at any level. And that did it. That crippled and eventually destroyed the Populist Movement of the nineteenth century.

(King, 1965)

In this extract, King attacks racist politicians whose sole interest at bottom is capitalistic. So, their strategy is not only to keep dividing the American society into two unequal sub-societies but also to maintain the poor, whether Whites or Blacks, in their precarious situations. Those racists saturated poor white people's minds with the need for a segregated society and clouded their minds to the real issue of equal distribution of wealth. All means were necessary to reach their goals. As long as Blacks kept their places, and Whites did not attempt to change the situation, a "negative peace" could reign. To make sure this token peace persevere, the racists imposed Jim Crow in American laws. In an allegorical explanation of how bad Jim Crow laws were for both communities, King said:

If it may be said of the slavery era that the white man took the world and gave the Negro Jesus, then it may be said of the Reconstruction era that the southern aristocracy took the world and gave the poor white man Jim Crow. He gave him Jim Crow. And when his wrinkled stomach cried out for the food that his empty pockets could not provide, he ate Jim Crow, a psychological bird that told him that no matter how bad off he was, at least he was a white man, better than the black man. And he ate Jim Crow. And when his undernourished children cried out for the necessities that his low wages could not provide, he showed them the Jim Crow signs on the buses and in the stores, on the streets and in the public buildings. And his children, too, learned to feed upon Jim Crow, their last outpost of psychological oblivion.

(King, 1965)

So far, it is obvious that American racists and bigots have put in place many political and legislative strategies to curb African Americans' voting rights. The social action of the civil rights leaders came into play when there was need to

bring about some change in the social structure, or to prevent the negative change from happening, which might have influenced the general population. The social action leader seeks the betterment of the masses through the principles of credibility building, legitimization, dramatization, multiple strategies, dual approach and manifold programs (Antony & Kaushik, 1986).

King's charisma through his mastery of the English language in an epoch when education was still on a high pedestal, along with his sartorial appearance, gave him credibility. His command of American history and his undeniable world knowledge of literature, among other mastered fields, legitimized his activism stance for civil rights in the eyes of White racists. His sense of narrating the plight of African Americans through a faithful witness of all the shameful episodes of their lives dramatized the situation. He was famous thanks to his multiple nonviolent strategies that involved nonviolent direct action in the face of racists and bigots as expressed by the following allegory and a number of periphrases as follows:

The method of nonviolent resistance was unsheathed from its scabbard.

New philosophy.

A new idea, more powerful than guns or clubs.

The most passionate pleas for human rights ever.

Forces of power.

Age-old oppressors.

The centuries-old blight.

(King, 1965)

All these strong positive points led to the desegregation of the Montgomery buses in 1956, then the signing of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* (see Diop, 2024) and eventually the signing of the *Voting Rights Act of 1965*. The speech "Our God Is Marching On" played a tremendous role in the signature of this act, and it deserves thorough investigation.

Studying the speech helps reread the somber pages of the history books of both the USA, in general, and African Americans, in particular. While King is the author of the address, the focus is not on him. The whole process that made the signature of the *Voting Rights Act of 1965* a reality involved King on the front line. It is crucial to remember then that King was one of the loudest and most eloquent voices that bore the cross. This paper will contextualize the speech under study. Then, it will explore the various figures of speech King uses to convey his message. This considers the tones, rhetorical devices such as *pathos*, *ethos* and *logos*, themes, quotations and emblematic figures or places.

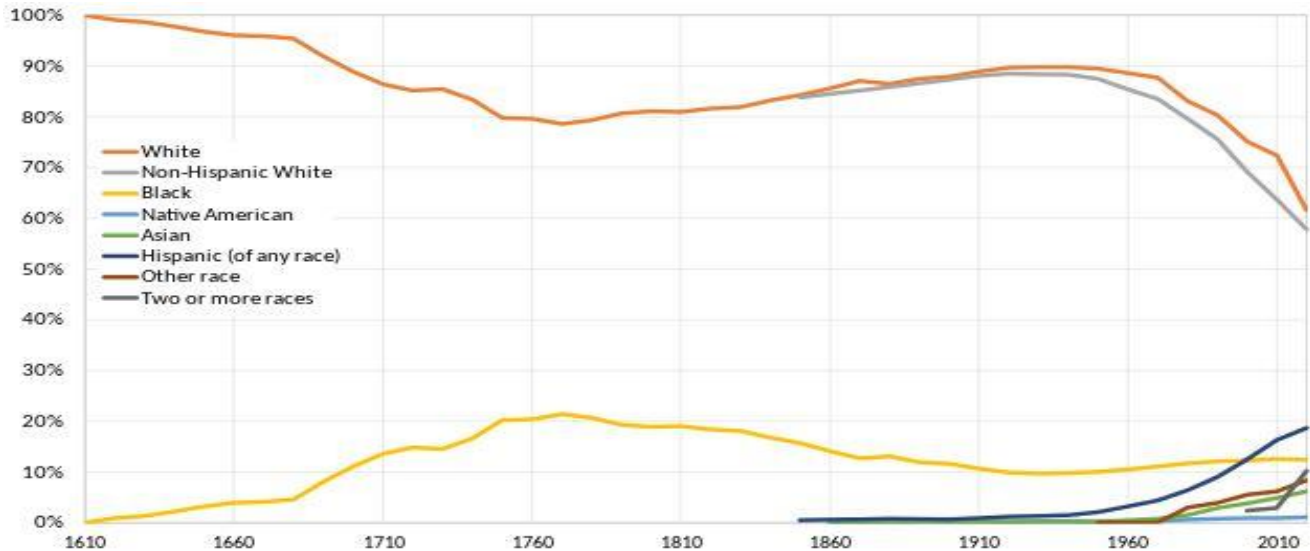
## 2. Context

Apart from physical assault, the other obstacle to African Americans' votes was the grandfather clause. The grandfather clause said that a man could only vote if his ancestor had been a voter before 1867, but the ancestors of most African-American citizens had been enslaved and constitutionally ineligible to vote. Another discriminatory tactic was the literacy test, applied by a white county clerk.

These clerks gave Black voters extremely difficult legal documents to read as a test, while white men received an easy text. Finally, in many places, white local government officials simply prevented potential voters from registering (National Geographic Society, 2023; Gordon, 1975).

By 1940, the percentage of eligible African American voters registered in the South was only three percent. As evidence

of the decline, during Reconstruction, the percentage of African American voting-age men registered to vote was more than 90 percent (National Geographic Society, 2023). Between 1910 and 1965, the Black population represented 10% of the U.S population. Next to the White population, Blacks were quite a representative number of the country as shown in the figure below.



**Figure 1:** Complete history of the racial and ethnic demographics of the United States in percentage of the population

**Source:** The Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia (2024)

One year before the passage of the *1965 Voting Rights Act*, on April 3, 1964, Malcolm X declared in an electrifying speech dedicated to African Americans' right to vote:

If we don't do something real soon, I think you'll have to agree that we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It's one or the other in 1964. It isn't that time is running out, time has run out!

(Malcom X, 1964)

Without the ballot, change was not conceivable. The change of living conditions with better housing, good employment opportunities, higher education, less poverty, and so forth, was only possible if African Americans had the right to cast their votes in ballot boxes. So the urgency of the hour, despite the passage of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, was the ballot. According to James Melvin Washington, on February 4, 1965, a federal court banned literacy testing and other silly technicalities used to deny African Americans the right to vote (King, 1986).

This happened after the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and other civil rights groups joined forces in Selma, Alabama, to demand black disenfranchisement. The demonstrations initiated by these groups of protestors ended in the illegal arrest of 3,000 people (King, 1986). The year 1965 was decisive in the African American experience because Malcolm X was killed in that year, and his murder deprived the black community strong and dedicated leadership, and the only leader who

could really match King's charisma and eloquence even if their strategies differed.

The killing of several activists and the imprisonment of thousands of African American protesters did not escape notice. On March 15, 1965, 36<sup>th</sup> U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson made a heartfelt speech titled "We Shall Overcome," just like the slogan of the Civil Rights Movement. In his sympathizing cause for African Americans' civil rights, he declares:

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy. [...] There [Selma, Alabama], long-suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many were brutally assaulted. One good man, a man of God, was killed. [...] Our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of this country: to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man. [...] The issue of equal rights for American Negroes is such an issue. And should we defeat every enemy, should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation.

(Johnson, 1965)

Ten days after Johnson's address on the voting legislation, on March 25, King made his speech "Our God Is Marching On" before the state capitol building, after a 54-mile march (King, 1986). In his address, King praises President Johnson's friendly position, and refers to him with the periphrasis, "a president born in the South". He goes on to declare that their whole campaign in Alabama had been

centered around the right to vote. In focusing the attention of the nation and the world today on the flagrant denial of the right to vote, they were exposing the very origin, the root cause, of racial segregation in the Southland (King, 1965). On August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed the *Voting Rights Act*.

### 3. Analysis and Comment

The title of King's great speech behind the *1965 Voting Rights Act*, "Our God Is Marching On", reminisces about the historical and sentimental hymn: "John Brown's body lies mouldering. But his soul goes marching on" (King, 2013). John Brown, a white abolitionist, was caught raiding the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, in 1859, for guns to arm African Americans in a slave rebellion (Gordon, 1975). King links the march to greatness and triumph with telling adjectives such as "mighty," "great," and "triumphant". He also correlates it with salvation as in the song dedicated to John Brown. Moreover, the orator uses religious words as if he wants to instill faith and hope into the activists who have marched for days beside him from Selma to Montgomery.

The romanticism of the march is also related to the ideals of the foundations of the USA: "land of freedom" and "American dream". For King, nothing is wrong about this march by all costs to obtain one's voting rights. In an allegory, he makes connections and parallelisms with the Battle of Jericho as described in the Biblical Book of Joshua. In this story, the walls of Jericho fell after the Israelites marched around the city walls (The Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia). The walls remind of the racist institutions and all despicable human exploitation forms, and the Israelites are the oppressed African Americans determined to win evil with good deeds.

From the first word to the last in the speech, these religion-related words and phrases appear: "God," "opening prayer," "God's children," "the Bible," "the Lord," "Glory," "hallelujah!" In his Christian outburst, King advocates that the soul has an inherent link with the body. So, the body becomes the prison of the soul when the person comes into the world. But this is just for a specific time. There will be a separation no matter how pleasant or unpleasant the prison is. Marchers for voting rights should not be afraid to suffer, to go to prison, or to die. The march itself does not stop at Montgomery. The march never really stops as long as injustice is rampant. This is reminiscent of Mother or Sister Pollard's story King loved to remember:

But today as I stand before you and think back over that great march, I can say, as Sister Pollard said, a seventy-year-old Negro woman who lived in this community during the bus boycott, and one day, she was asked while walking if she didn't want to ride. And when she answered, "No," the person said, "Well, aren't you tired?" And with her ungrammatical profundity, she said, "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested." And in a real sense this afternoon, we can say that our feet are tired, but our souls are rested.

(King, 1965)

The logic behind this is that only true believers can keep marching nonviolently. When the march had started from Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge, the marchers experienced beatings, and were turned back by Alabama state troopers (King, 1986). Later, in his speech, King would draw inspiration from these trials and tribulations to ironize African Americans' bullies:

It was normalcy in Birmingham that led to the murder on Sunday morning of four beautiful, unoffending, innocent girls [killed on September 15, 1963]. It was normalcy on Highway 80 that led state troopers to use tear gas and horses and billy clubs against unarmed human beings who were simply marching for justice. It was normalcy by a cafe in Selma, Alabama, that led to the brutal beating of Reverend James Reeb [killed on March 9, 1965]. It is normalcy all over our country which leaves the Negro perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of vast ocean of material prosperity. It is normalcy all over Alabama that prevents the Negro from becoming a registered voter. No, we will not allow Alabama to return to normalcy.

(King, 1965)

This, however, did not deter them from marching. In an asyndeton, King pronounces, "We are still in for a season of suffering in many of the black belt counties of Alabama, many areas of Mississippi, many areas of Louisiana." For him, when persons know how to tame their souls, then they will be able to tame even their worst enemies. By exposing their bodies, marchers make their oppressors liable of whatever might happen. In an anaphora outburst, King insists on the need to go on protesting:

We have walked ... We have walked ... We have walked.

We are on the move now ... We are on the move now ... We are on the move now.

Let us march on ballot boxes ... Let us march on ballot boxes ... Let us march on ballot boxes.

(King, 1965)

Another King's anaphora is the question followed by an answer: "How long? Not long". This means, "Have faith in the nonviolent struggle; never abandon fighting for your voting rights; in the near future, everything will be alright, but in the meantime, know that there will be no rest." Here, King uses the persuasive and power strategies to reason and urge his non-sympathizers to accept his different viewpoints, and to coerce them into providing the activists with their desired objectives. Hyperbole is the figure of speech he resorts to in order to persuade and force the racists and bigots into ending their old-fashioned perception of society:

We have walked through desolate valleys and across the trying hills.

We have walked on meandering highways and rested our bodies on rocky byways.

Some of our faces are burned from the outpourings of the sweltering sun.

Some have literally slept in the mud. We have been drenched by the rains.

And there were those who said that we would get here only over their dead bodies, but all the world today knows that we are here and we are standing before the forces of power in the state of Alabama saying, “We ain’t go in’ let nobody turn us around.”

... not even the marching of mighty armies can halt us.

The pattern of their feet as they walked through Jim Crow barriers in the great stride toward freedom is the thunder of the marching men of Joshua, and the world rocks beneath their tread.

(King, 1965)

By exhorting his fellow activists to carry on marching, King also prompts neutral white people to join him or sympathize with him. He uses the educational and facilitative strategies, also called *logos*, to educate people all over the world about the situation of African Americans. He gives necessary information about the race relations crisis through descriptive antitheses:

If the worst in American life lurked in its dark streets, the best of American instincts arose passionately from across the nation to overcome it.

From Montgomery to Birmingham, from Birmingham to Selma, from Selma back to Montgomery, a trail wound in a circle long and often bloody, yet it has become a highway up from darkness.

Let us march on ballot boxes until the salient misdeeds of bloodthirsty mobs will be transformed into the calculated good deeds of orderly citizens.

It is normalcy all over our country which leaves the Negro perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of vast ocean of material prosperity.

...nonviolence and its power can transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.

When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, plucked from weary souls with chains of fear and the manacles of death?

(King, 1965)

King employs the lexical field of violence to dramatize the race relations blight, “racism,” “the burning of our churches,” “the bombing of our homes,” “the beating and

killing,” and “murderers”. In addition to these stark realities, these antitheses above contain metaphors opposing good and evil as emphasized in the table below:

**Table 1: Metaphorical opposition of good and evil**

A highway up from darkness	A trail wound in a circle
Vast ocean of material prosperity	A lonely island of poverty
The radiant star of hope	The nocturnal bosom of this lonely night

King believed in nonviolence by all costs, but nonviolence has several limits in a police state and in a tyrannical country. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela had resorted to nonviolence in the beginning to emulate Mahatma Gandhi, but in the long run, it became clear to him that the apartheid lovers did not understand his strategy language. In the USA, Malcolm X declared that African Americans in the ghettos do not want to hear the “turn the-other-cheek” strategy (Malcolm X, 1964). Unlike King who adamantly believed in nonviolence on all fronts, Malcolm thought that the “eye for an eye” solution carried heavy weight.

The USA is a democratic country not a country ruled by a tyrant. Several examples of aborted black rebellions in the past decide in King’s favor. A successful rebellion depends on circumstances and resources. Without material and human means, it could be difficult to use violence, and be vanquisher. The major southern slave uprisings of Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822 and Nat Turner in 1831, and other resistance efforts were sternly suppressed (Gordon, 1975). African Americans were largely outnumbered and the objects with which they worked on plantations could not match slave owner’s sophisticated firearms. Besides, any African American could easily betray the rebellion cause upon a simple and uncertain promise of freedom. Even though, rebels have the same firearms as their oppressors, an improvised and ill-organized rebellion will have little chance to flourish. John Brown’s rebellion attempt is a relevant example.

Had the context been different, these major southern slave uprisings could have ended successful. The American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) and the American Civil War (1861-1865) are illuminating examples. Instead of urging African Americans to rebel using firearms if necessary, King’s sense of leadership impregnated with high education and good command of the context bore its fruits. Instead of attacking physically the oppressors of his fellow African Americans, he rams in a more delicate point: conscience. King uses these personifications as humor to ridicule racialism with both sarcastic and ironic tones:

The conscience of America begin to bleed.

Alabama has tried to nurture and defend evil, but evil is choking to death in the dusty roads and streets of this state.

... segregation is on its deathbed in Alabama, and the only thing uncertain about it is how costly the segregationists and Wallace will make the funeral.

When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?

How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?

(King, 1965)

Even if King's option for nonviolence had limits, his credibility as a born mass leader increased. In his credibility building, King quotes historian Comer Vann Woodward and his book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. According to King (1965), Woodward clearly points out that the segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land. He goes on to quote literary figures James Weldon Johnson, Victor Hugo, William Cullen Bryant, James Russell Lowell, and sings the "Battle Hymn of the Republic". The "Battle Hymn of the Republic," also known as "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory" or "Glory, Glory Hallelujah" outside of the United States, is an American patriotic song written by abolitionist writer Julia Ward Howe during the American Civil War (The Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia, 2024).

One of the common denominator of King's works is songs. Sometimes, they come in the form of slogans, hymns, anthems, prayers or poems. Songs play an important role in liberation movements. When during his interview with *Playboy*, the journalist asked him if anthems were important to morale, King answered that:

In a sense, songs are the soul of a movement. Consider, in World War II, *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition*, and in World War I, *Over There* and *Tipperary*, and during the Civil War, *Battle Hymn of the Republic* and *John Brown's Body*. A Negro song anthology would include sorrow songs, shouts for joy, battle hymns, anthems. Since slavery, the Negro has sung throughout his struggle in America. *Steal Away* and *Go Down, Moses* were the songs of faith and inspiration which were sung on the plantations. For the same reasons the slaves sang, Negroes today sing freedom songs, for we, too, are in bondage. We sing out our determination that "We shall overcome, black and white together, we shall overcome someday." I should also mention a song parody that I enjoyed very much which the Negroes sang during our campaign in Albany, Georgia. It goes: 'I'm coming', I'm comin'/And my head ain't bendin' low/I'm walkin' tall, I'm talking strong/I'm America's New Black Joe."

(King, 1991)

Freedom songs are the soul of liberation movements in the experience of African Americans. Black slaves used to sing on plantations to overcome their hardships under the scorching sun. Songs were their allies during times of deprivation, and songs soothed their fears and pains when

the whip was raging on their bodies. During the Civil Rights Movement, songs came back to help African Americans denounce racism, criticize poverty, advocate equal education and plead for good housing conditions. In his denouncement of racism and indictment of the racists and corrupt politicians whom the American apartheid system benefits, King believed in a beloved community. This actually refers to a fair color-blind society that promotes peace, equal share of resources, but especially good neighborliness. King dreams that:

Negroes and whites live side by side in decent, safe, and sanitary housing.

Negroes and whites study side-by-side in the socially-healing context of the classroom.

We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. And that will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man.

(King, 1965)

King's dream of an integrated society that sits Blacks and Whites together at the same table appears several times in his works. Today that dream has come true. His struggle for freedom has born its fruits. However, King's dream is not an ordinary hope and faith in a fair colorblind society. It goes beyond this. His dream is a society born on the ashes of violence and destruction; a society molded in the metals of reconciliation, redemption and goodwill; a society that becomes a beloved community. According to James Melvin Washington, "Some black leaders, such as Malcolm X, argued that King's vision was only a tragic fantasy" (King, 1991).

It is not surprising that a man of God thinks of the ideal society in such a beautiful way, but even the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an are full of stories of treachery, deceit, suffering and divine punishment. The whole story of humankind, from Adam until the present, is full of human tragedies. Therefore, King's beloved community must be contextualized in a society where justice and equality are the principal concerns.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted that Martin Luther King, Jr., played an essential role in the signing of the *Voting Rights Act of 1965*, as did Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Ralph Abernathy, A. Philip Randolph, and before them, Booker T. Washington, William E. B. Du Bois, to list a few leaders among thousands. President Johnson signed this momentous act out of political courage after so much American blood flowed in street attacks, in church bombings, and in other dreadful circumstances, sometimes unimaginable. Great speeches go down into history thanks to their impact in society. This paper has also explored the rhetorical devices and content of King's speech "Our God Is Marching On" of 1965. King made this address at the end of a 54-mile march harshly and illegally quelled by the local authorities. The

richness of this speech lies in the fact that so many literary ingredients make it a masterpiece in American literature.

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## Author Profile



**Mouhamed DIOP** has a PhD in American and Caribbean Studies at Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Senegal. He is also holder of a Master's Degree in Translation. He works as a part-time teacher of translation studies at the said university and as a full-time teacher of English at a public high school.