

Breaking Away From Expectations:
***What Is the What* and *What We All Long For* as Refugee Narratives**

Abstract

In the face of present-day global conflicts and massive human displacement, refugee stories and narratives are playing an increasingly important role in outlining the struggles and challenges that these displaced groups face. Yet despite extensive coverage and awareness of these challenges, there appears to be certain expectations amongst Western audiences of how a refugee narrative should be told. These expectations erase the individuality of refugee narratives, and demand depictions of refugees as innocent and helpless, as well as dependent on the values of Western humanism. This essay critically examines two novels, *What Is the What* by Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng, and *What We All Long For* by Dionne Brand, that function as refugee narratives. It explores how both novels successfully move away from expectations readers have of refugee narratives by telling stories of individuals who, under extremely difficult circumstances, exercise power and agency over their own lives. In doing so, both *What Is the What* and *What We All Long For* teach their readers about the scope and depth of individual refugee narratives, and give voices to a group that, more often than not, is rendered speechless by the rest of the world.