New Perspectives on Displacement: Utopias, Archipelagos and Social Ecotones

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Conference on “Migrations: Interdisciplinary Challenges”
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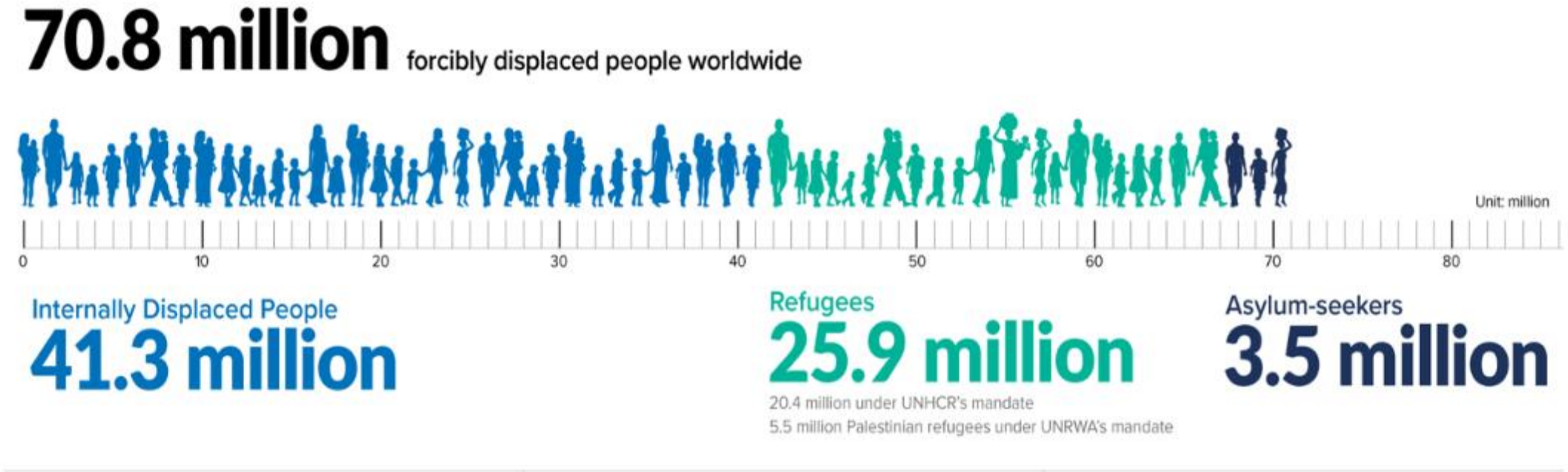
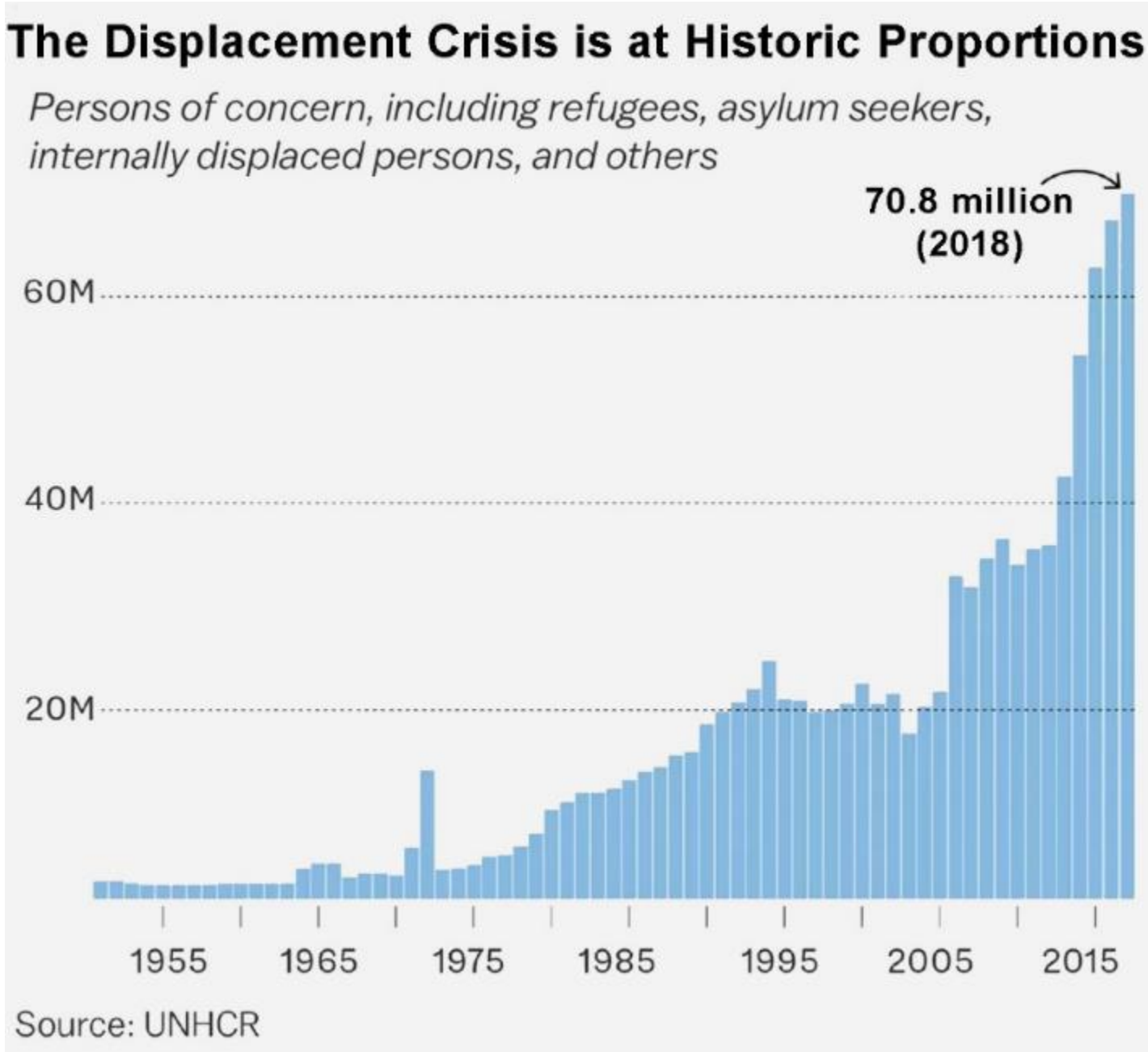
Number of Displacees

UNHCR data (2019)

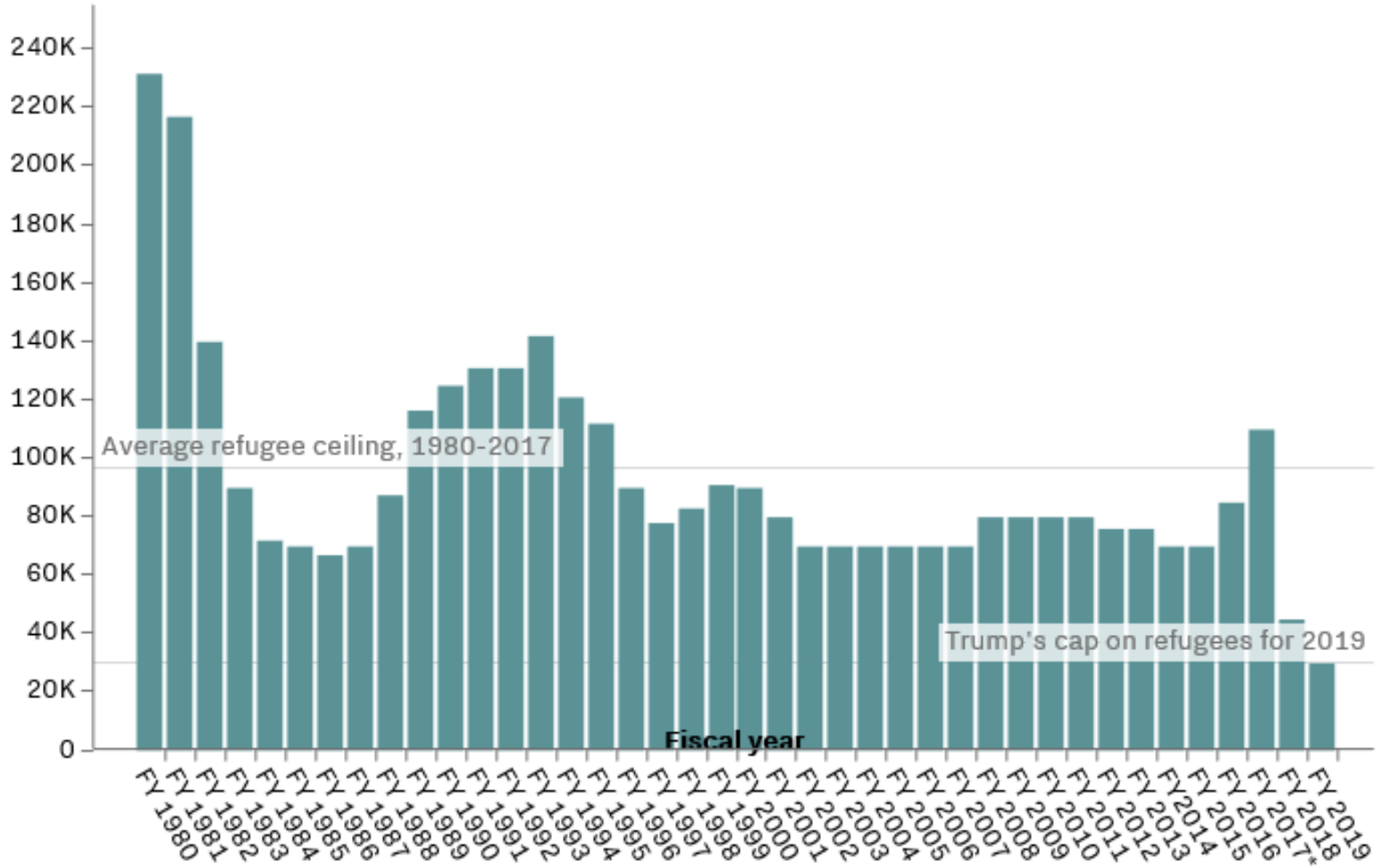


https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html


The Displacement Crisis is at Historic Proportions
Persons of concern, including refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, and others
70.8 million (2018)
60M
40M
20M
1955
1965
1975
1985
1995
2005
2015
Source: UNHCR

Trump's refugee policy, in context

At most, the US will welcome 30,000 refugees in fiscal year 2019 — less than a third of the pre-Trump average.

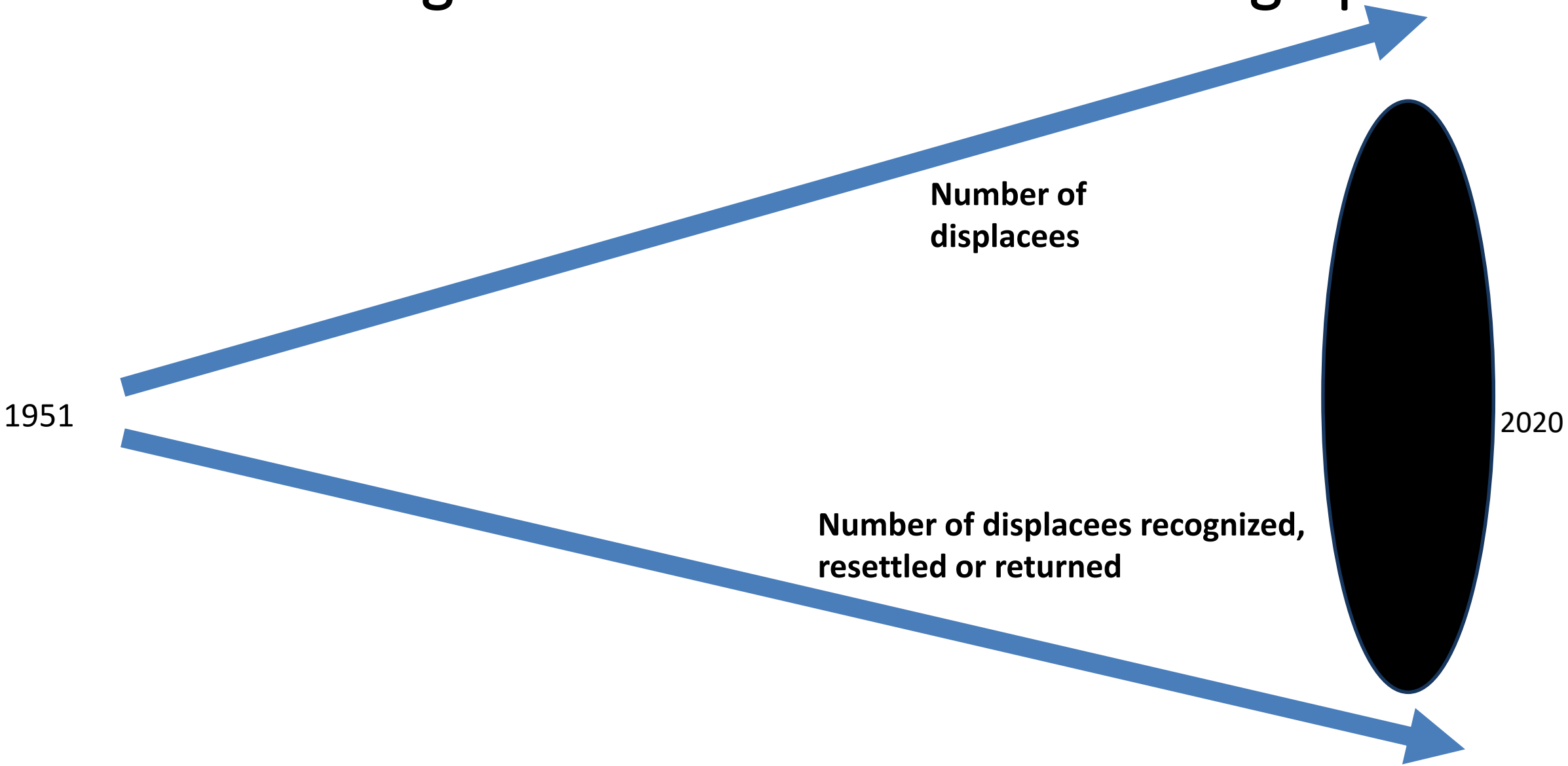


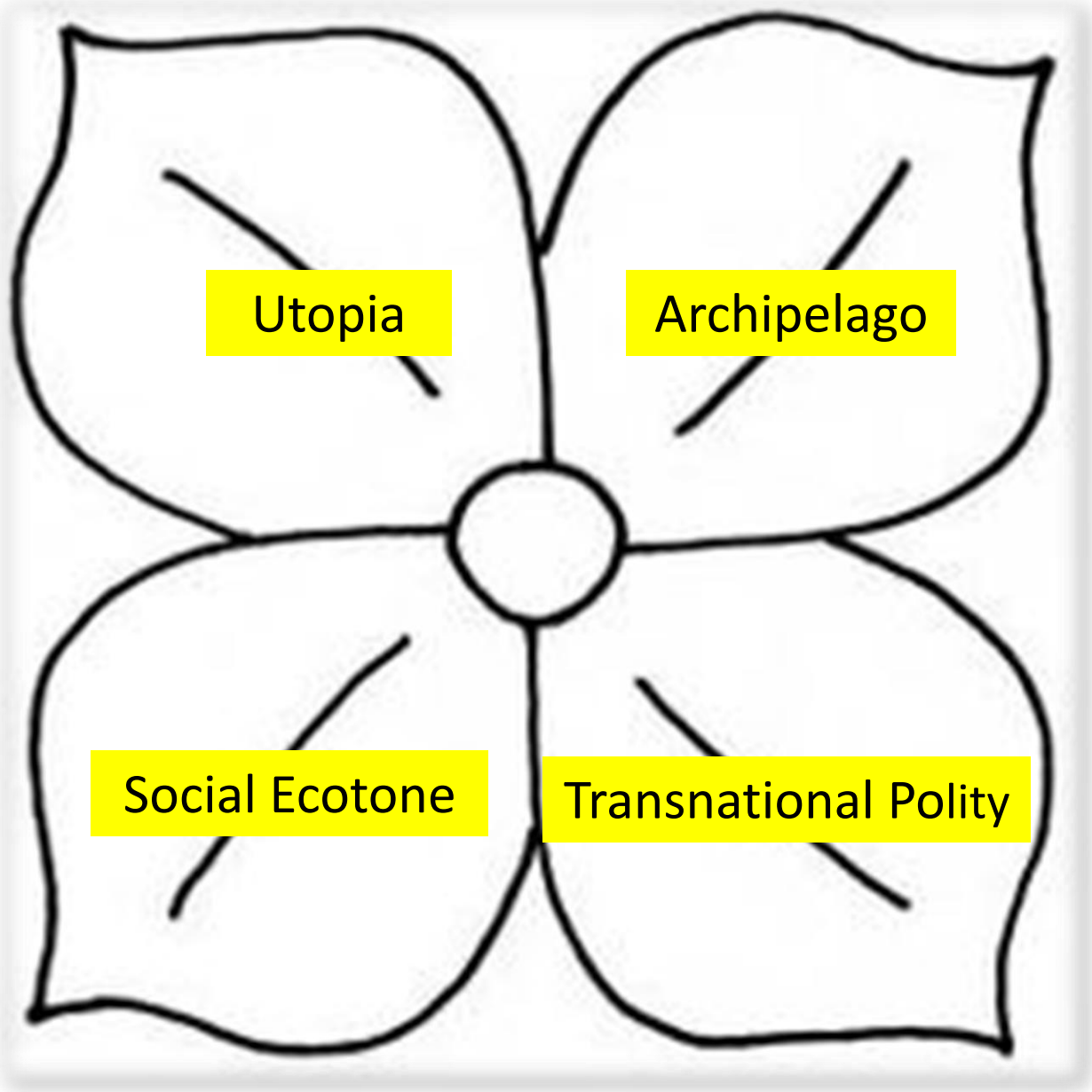
Tick tock

ONE person is displaced
every TWO seconds

Only 1.3 per cent of displacees
were settled in 2018

The imagination dark hole: illustrative graph




Utopia
Archipelago
Social Ecotone
Transnational Polity

Beyond Utopia as nowhere / an imaginary island (1)

- Imagined by Thomas More (1516) as an island
- οὐ (“not”) and τόπος (“place”)
- εὖ (“good” or “well”) and τόπος (“place”)
- Slavoj Žižek: “Utopia is not [a] kind of a free imagination, utopia is a matter of innermost urgency, you are forced to imagine it, it is the only way out, and this is what we need today.”

Utopia as destination (2)

Adapted from Lucas Theis

Utopia as method (3)
Ruth Levitas

With Levitas (2013), **we see utopian thinking as 'method' building alternative scenarios in a rich, inventive way.** By projecting into the future the lessons of the past the limitations of present can be starkly and honestly revealed.

"**Utopia** is not simply a thought experiment in a conventional sense, for it **necessarily operates at the level of affect as well as intellect.**"

Thus, **utopianism transforms statements about what is, to what could be and then what should be.** Unlike the cynical realists who empty out the utopian by reducing everything to the possible and acceptable (and thence ineluctably to the likely or expedient), **utopian thinking, strictly speaking, insists on including an ideal alternative, even if it appears impossible at first sight**.

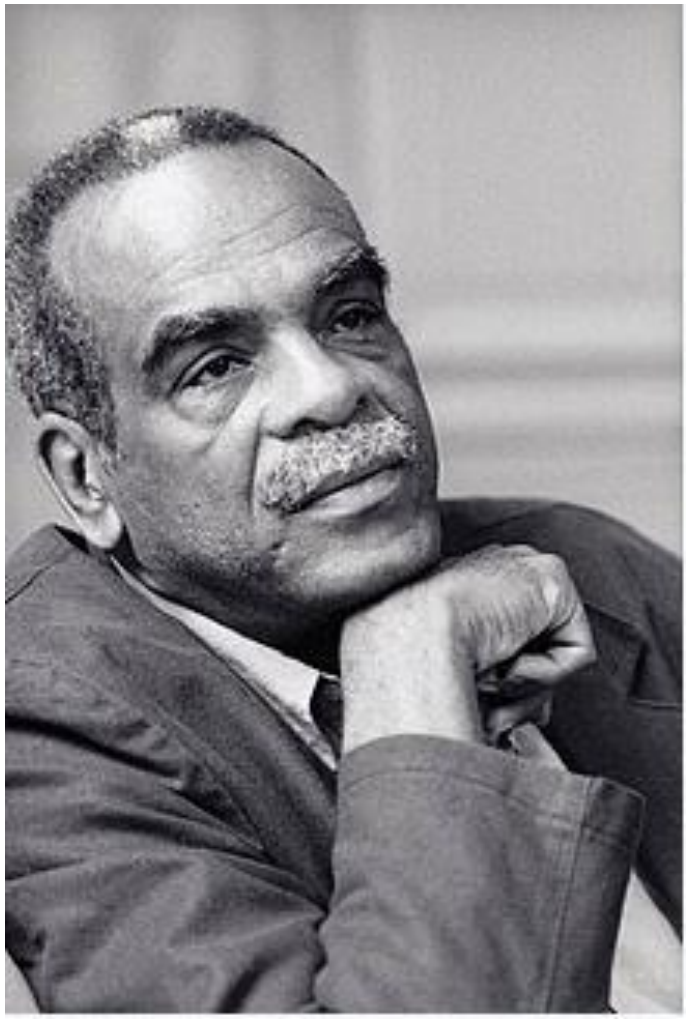
Visualizing the archipelago

Archipelagic theory
Édouard Glissant

For Glissant, "**the entire world is becoming an archipelago** … sites for understanding the complex new relations that ambivalently and chaotically join together all the hitherto unconnected parts of the world". Bongie (1999: 89)

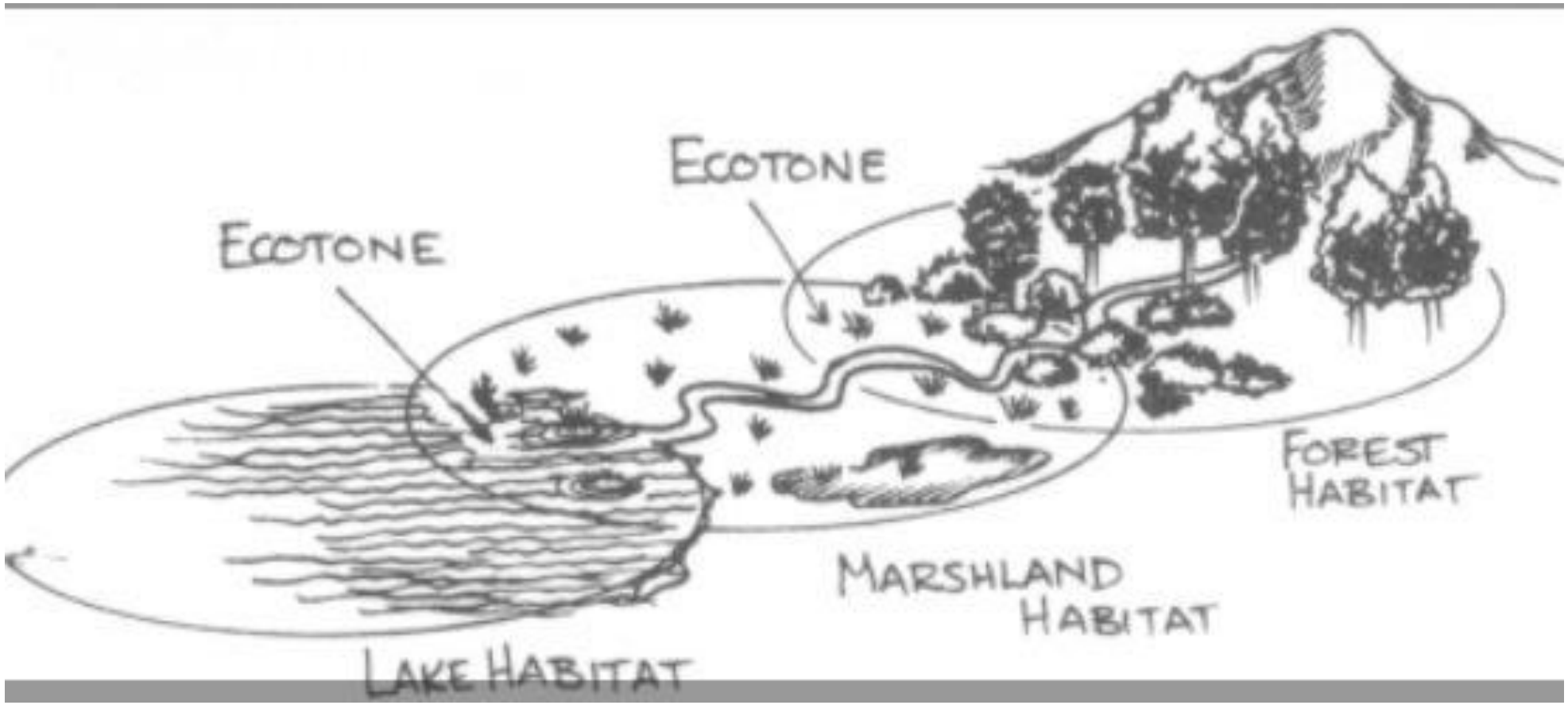
"the insurrection of the imaginary" destroys the normativity of the nation-state. Instead, **archipelagic thinking allows us to interweave transnational threads and networks**, rhizomes and epiphytes, diasporas and epistemic communities, nodes and edges.

With the aid of an archipelagic imagination, we can usefully envision the components and connections of the transnational archipelago that will make up and continually refashion a home for the displaced (Cohen and Van Hear call this 'Refugia').

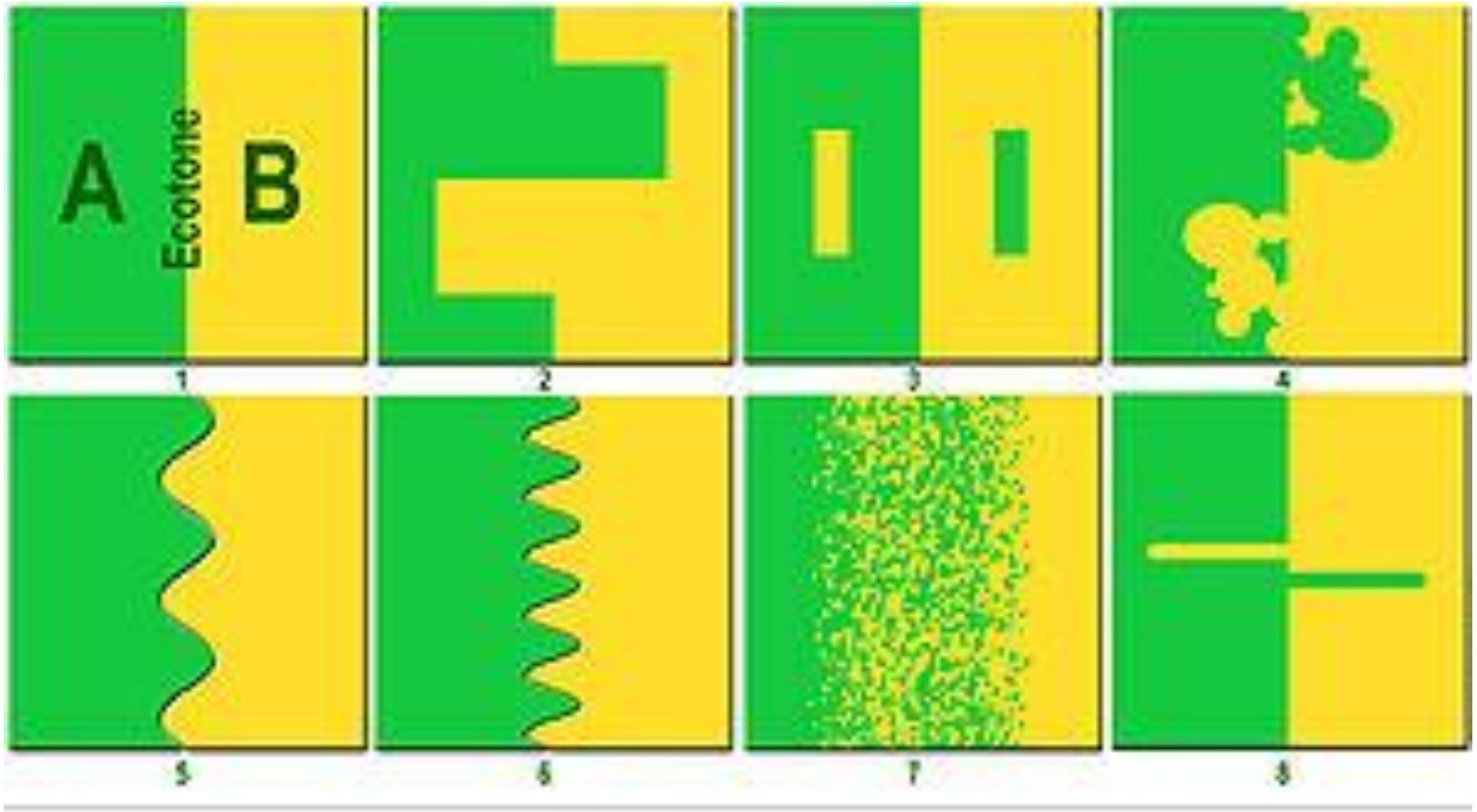


Ecotones in biology

Richer in species than habitats on either side



Visualizing Social Ecotones



Trump’s wall replaced with a social ecotone

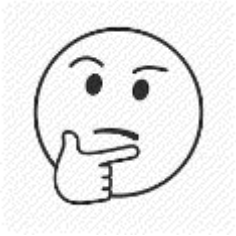
Social Ecotone (theory)

Judith Misrahi-Barak/Thomas Lacroix

"**An ecotone is a transitional area between two or more distinct ecological communities ... A [social] ecotone indicates a place where two communities meet, at times creolizing or germinating into a new community**.

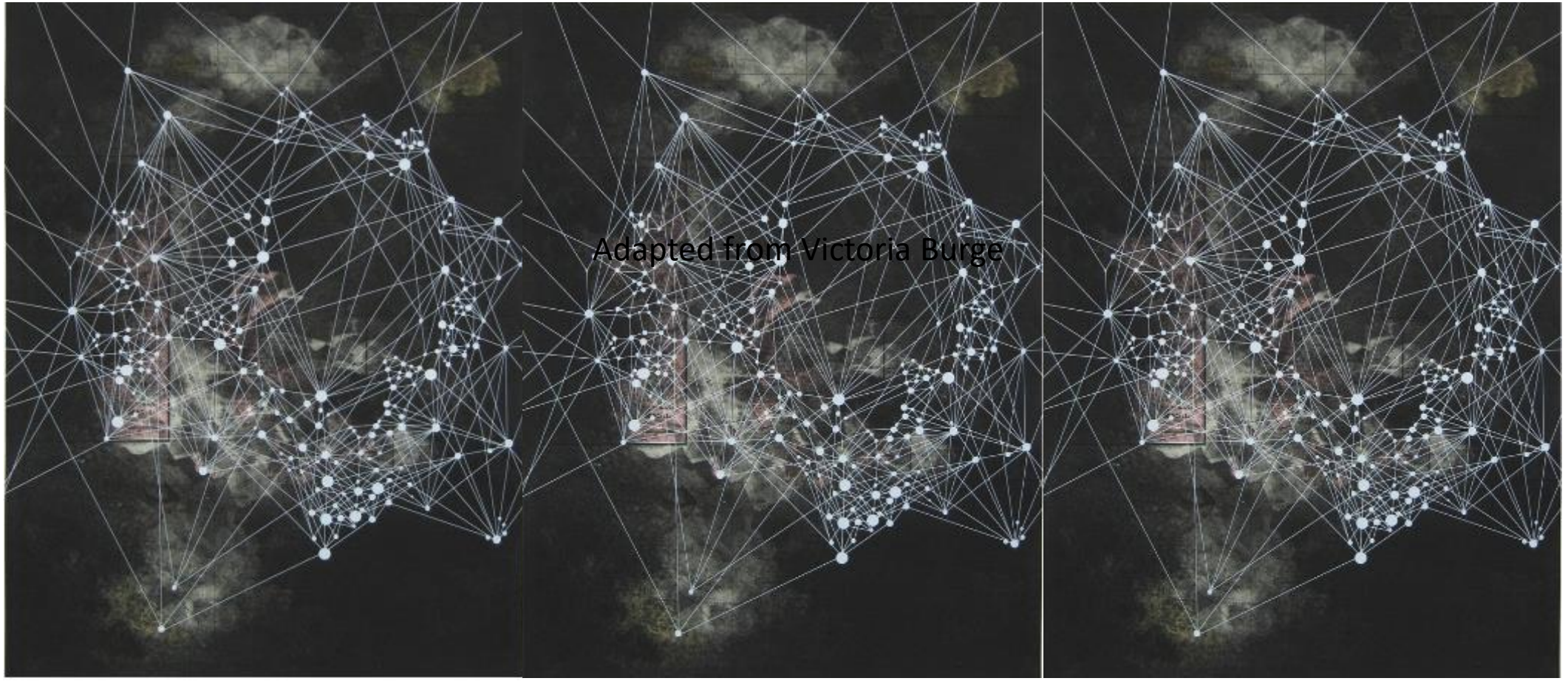
"[We seek] to continue exploring the 'complex chemistry' of creolizing worlds (Robin Cohen), the 'contact zones' between cultures (Mary Louise Pratt) in contexts such as migration, diaspora, refugee movements and other postcolonial displacements and environmental evacuations."

"An ecotone offers an entry to grasp the dynamics of mutation, contact, hybridization, confrontation and their spatial and ecological implications."



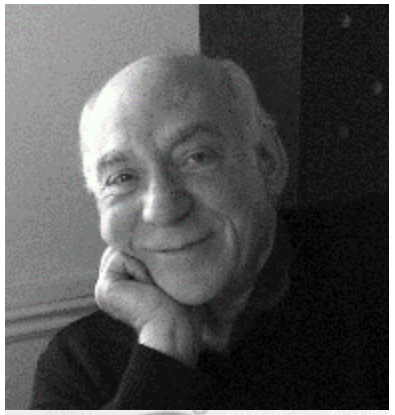
A transnational polity

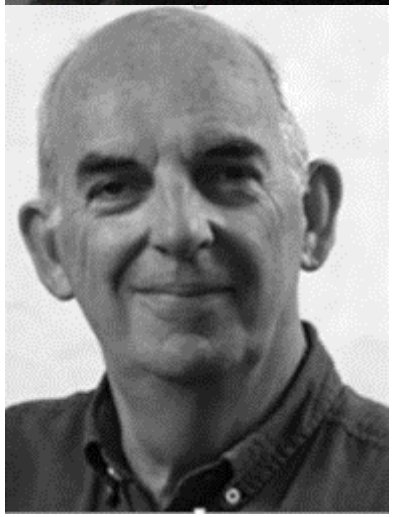
Images adapted from Victoria Burge



A transnational polity
Robin Cohen/Nicholas Van Hear

- Nation-states flagging
- Other units with global reach
- Deterritorializing the nation
- From national identities to liquid social identities
- From heritage identities to purposive identities
- Making homes on the move





Our proposal: Refugia

- Multi-sited (many Refugiums)
- Transnational
- Refugee-led and democratically-governed
- Voluntary entrance and exit
- Digitally connected
- Benefits delivered through ‘Sesame chip’
- Enhances safety
- Fosters mobility within and beyond Refugia
- Competes in sporting competitions
- A voice in international forums
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Refugee flag designed by Yara Said, a refugee from Syria

Conclusion and links

Ongoing forum on Refugia, including critiques. Search term “COMPAS Refugia”

Cohen, Robin & Nicholas Van Hear, ‘Visions of Refugia: territorial and transnational solutions to mass displacement’, *Planning Theory & Practice*, 18 (3) 2017, 494–504. Search term “Visions of Refugia”

Van Hear, Nicholas et al. ‘Refugia roundtable – imagining Refugia: thinking outside the current refugee regime’, *Migration and Society*, 1 (1) 2018, 175–194. Search term “Refugia Migration and Society”

Cohen, Robin & Nicholas Van Hear (book, available December 2019) *Refugia: Radical solutions to mass displacement*, Routledge. Search term “Routledge Refugia”