WHAT COUNTS AS CONTEMPORARY FICTION?

Scale, Value, and Field

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2015

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2014-2015

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2014

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2013-2014

Scale and Value:

New and Digital Approaches to Literary History

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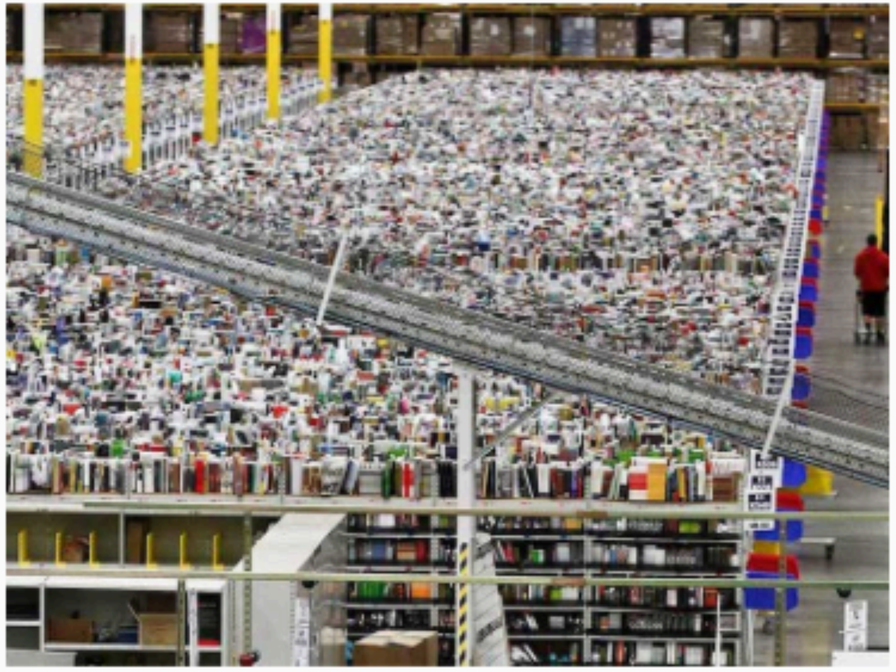
Jim English • Günter Leypoldt • Hoyt Long • Heather Love

Laura Mandell • Sharon Marcus • Richard Jean So • Ted Underwood

plenary address by Mark McGurl

discussants: Chris Jimenez • Evan Kindley • Nirvana Tanoukhi



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- can we obtain suitably “big” data for this field?
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What should be the scale of our explanatory logic?

- *grands récits* or local narratives of historical change?

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Caution: Temporal setting ≠ Genre !!!

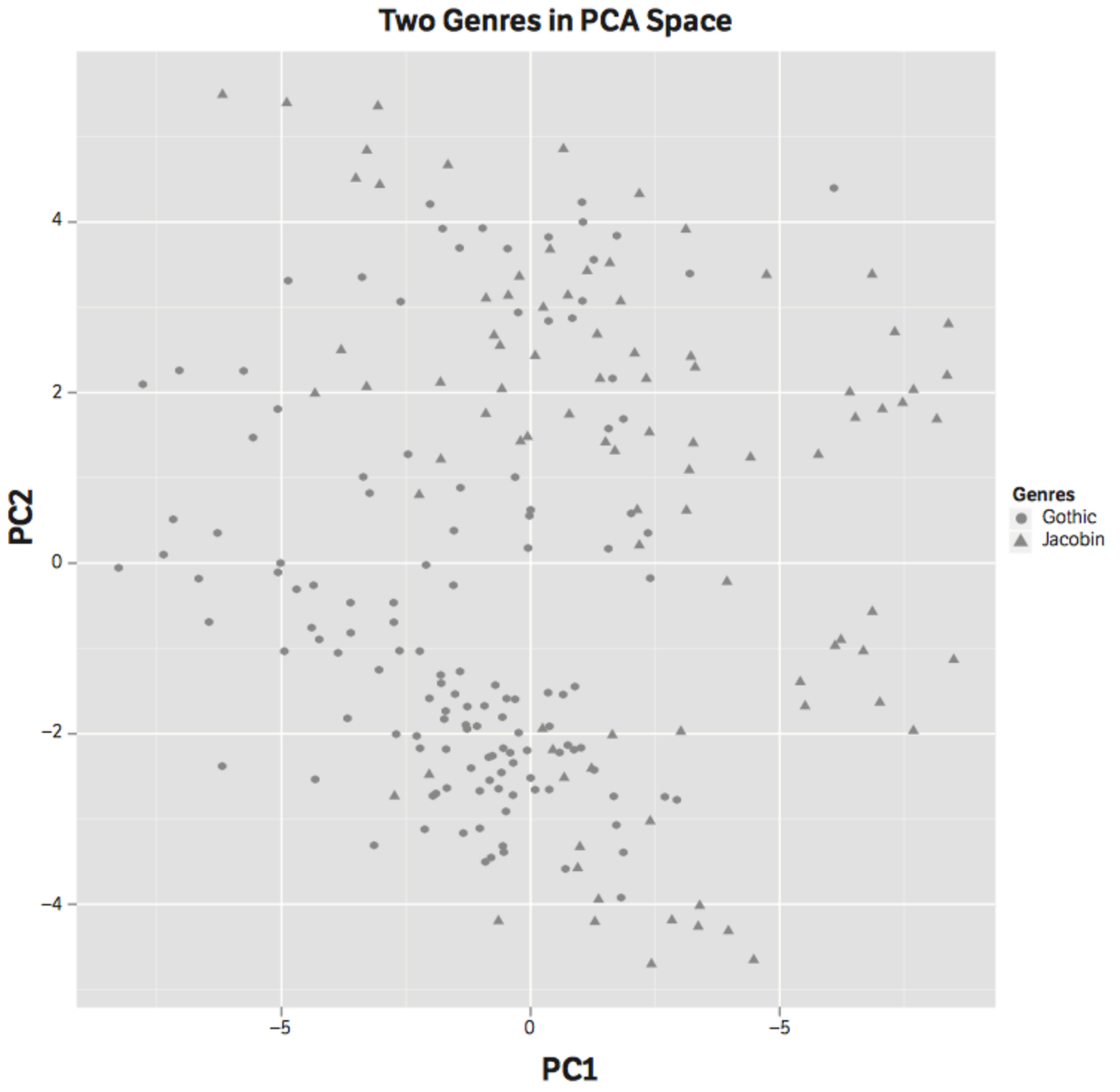
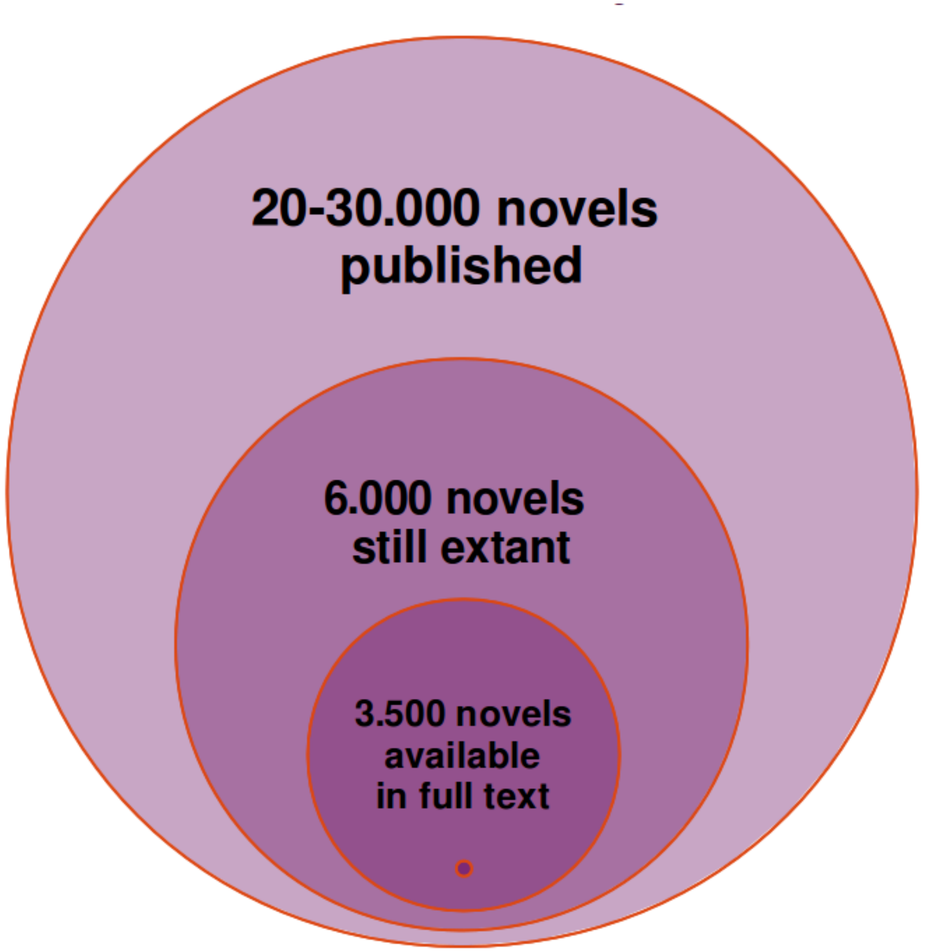


Figure 7.7: Most Frequent Word scatterplot of two genres rated on first two principal components.

Digitization and Availability of 19th-Century British Novels

Published / Still Extant / Digitized



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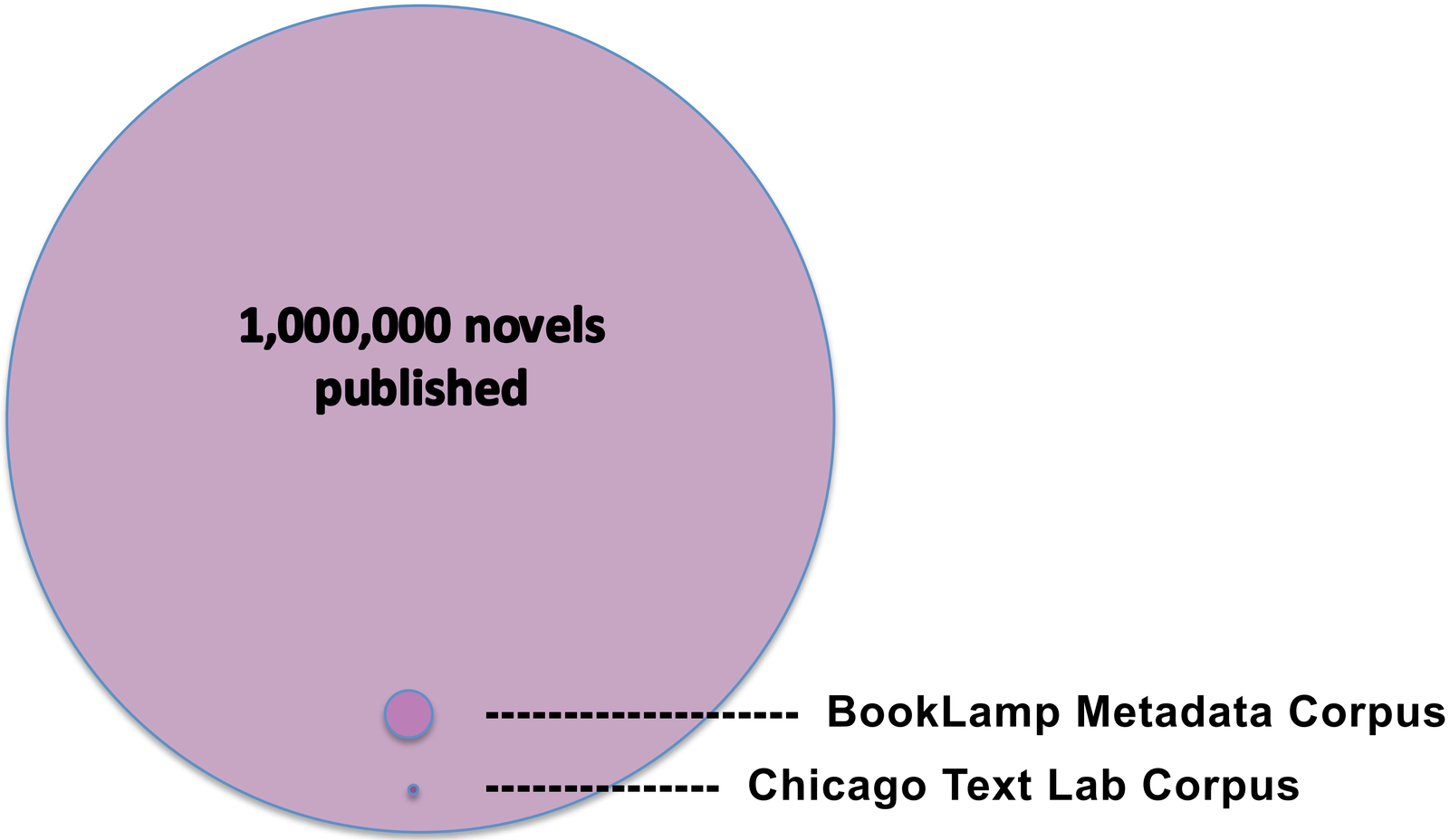
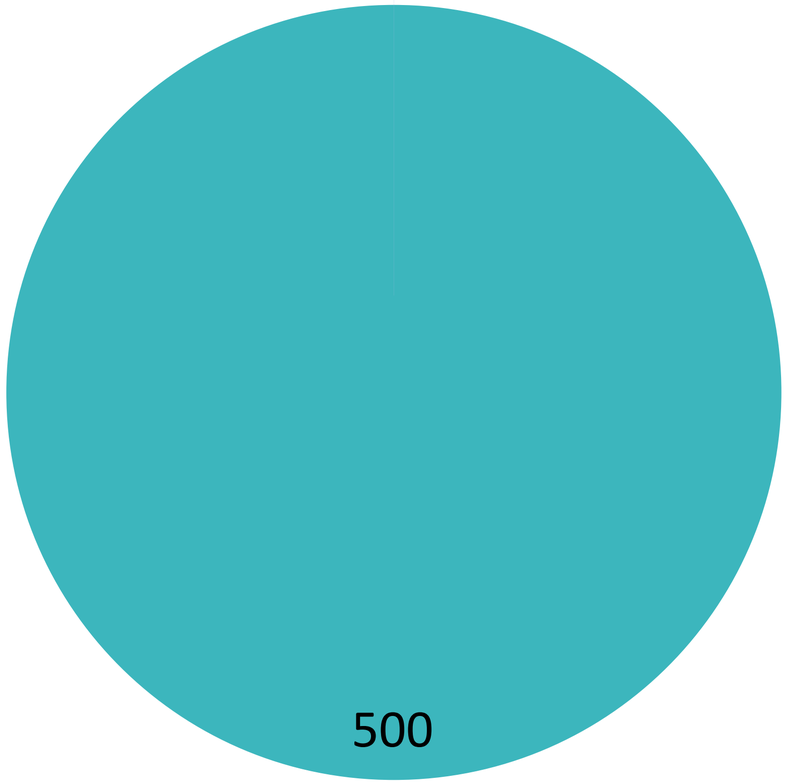
Digitization and Availability of Novels Published Since 1960

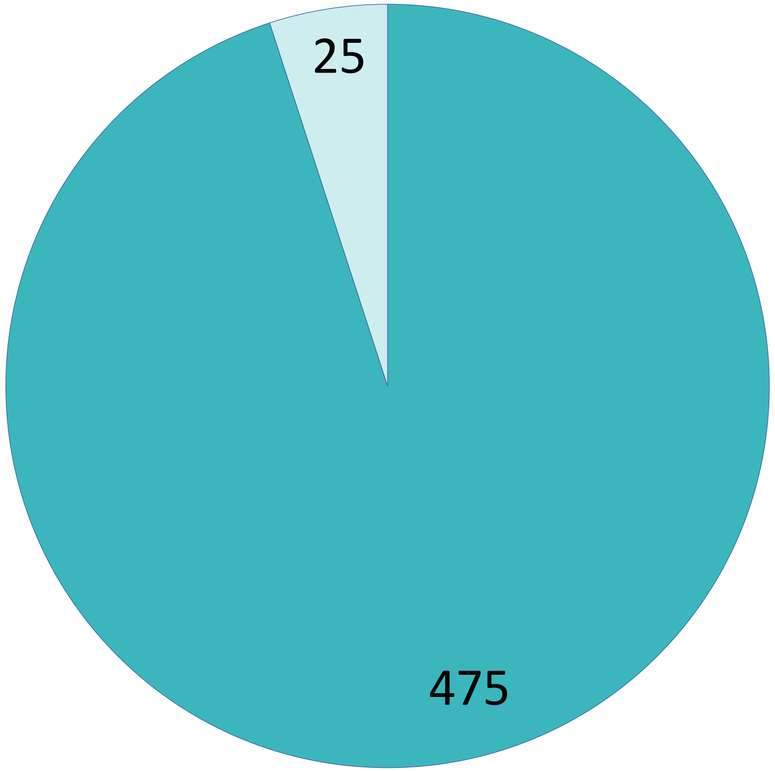
Published / BookLamp / Chicago Text Lab



Random Samples of 2012 Adult Fiction

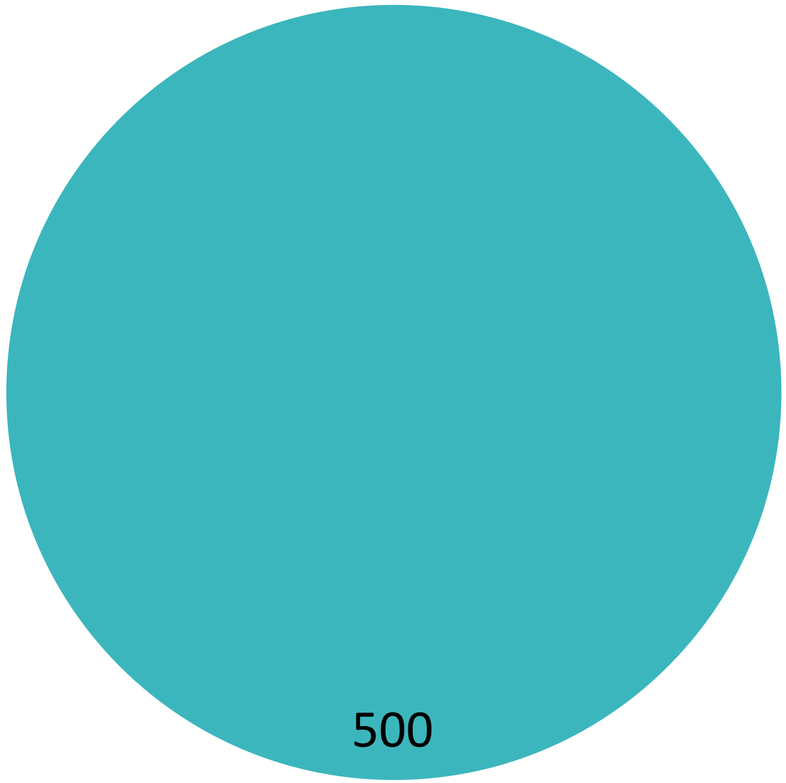
Fifty Shades of Grey in unweighted vs sales-weighted samples

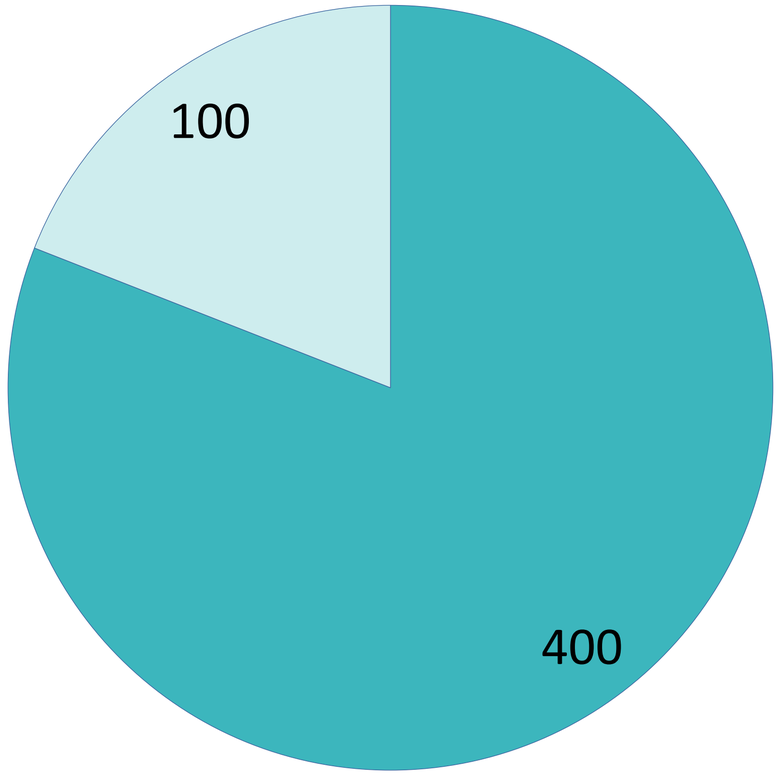




Random Samples of 2012 Adult Fiction

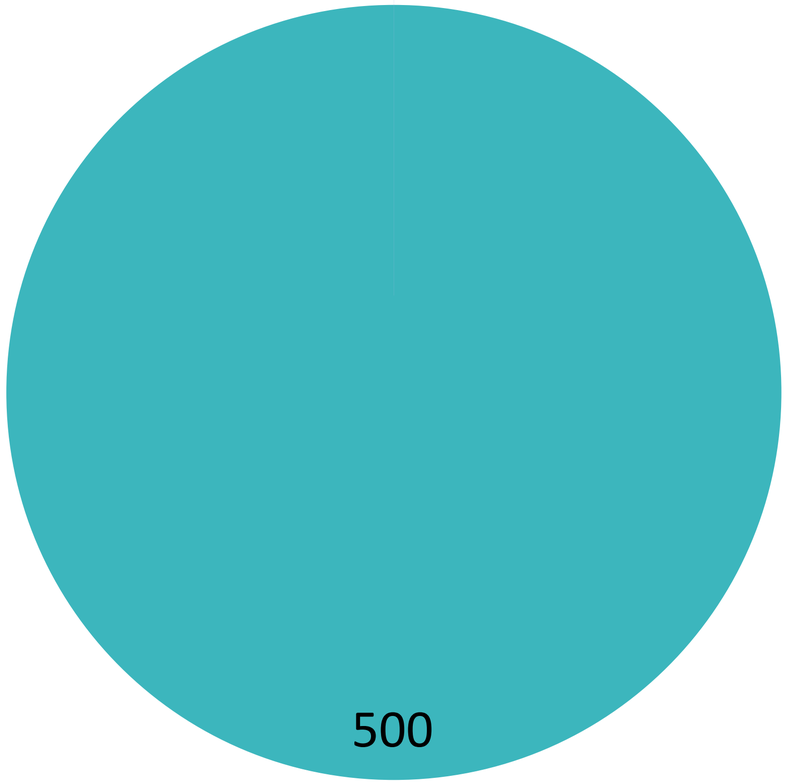
Top-ten bestsellers in unweighted vs sales-weighted samples

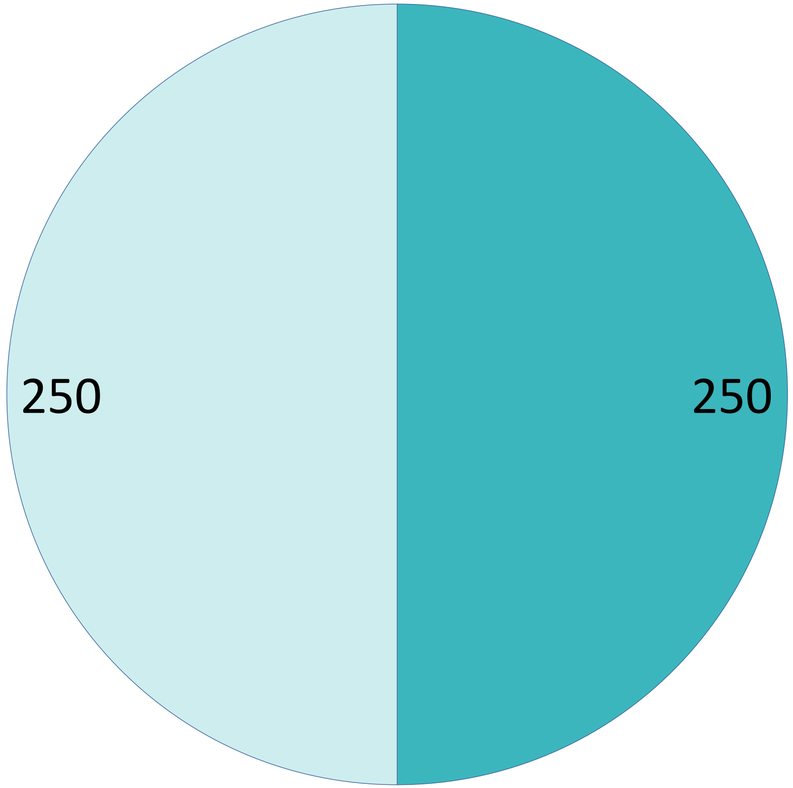




Random Samples of 2012 Adult Fiction

Top 0.1% of novels by sales volume in unweighted vs sales-weighted samples





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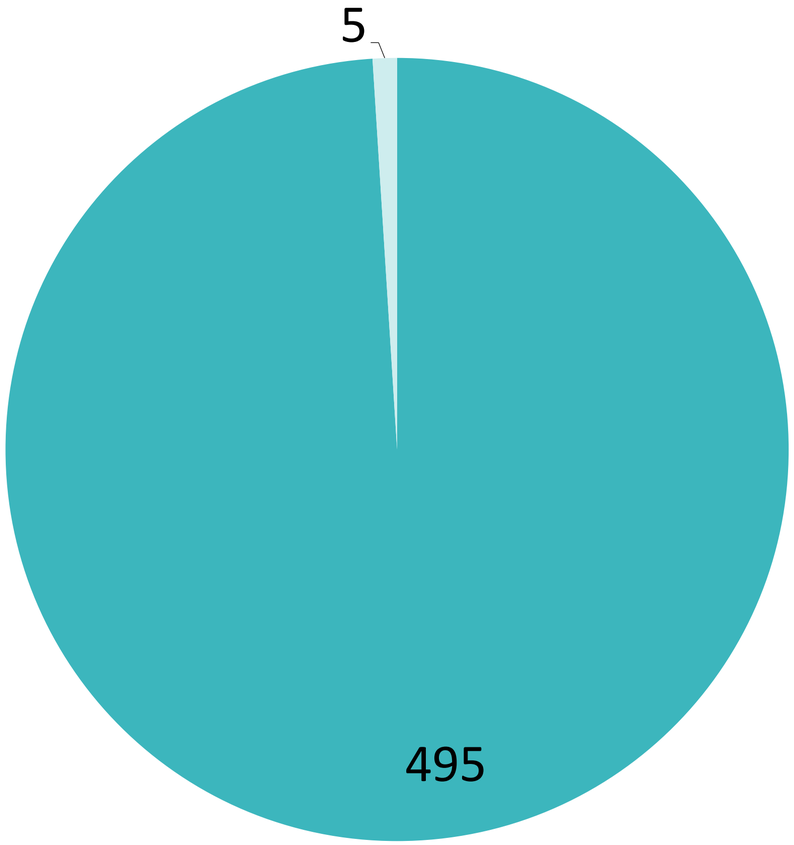
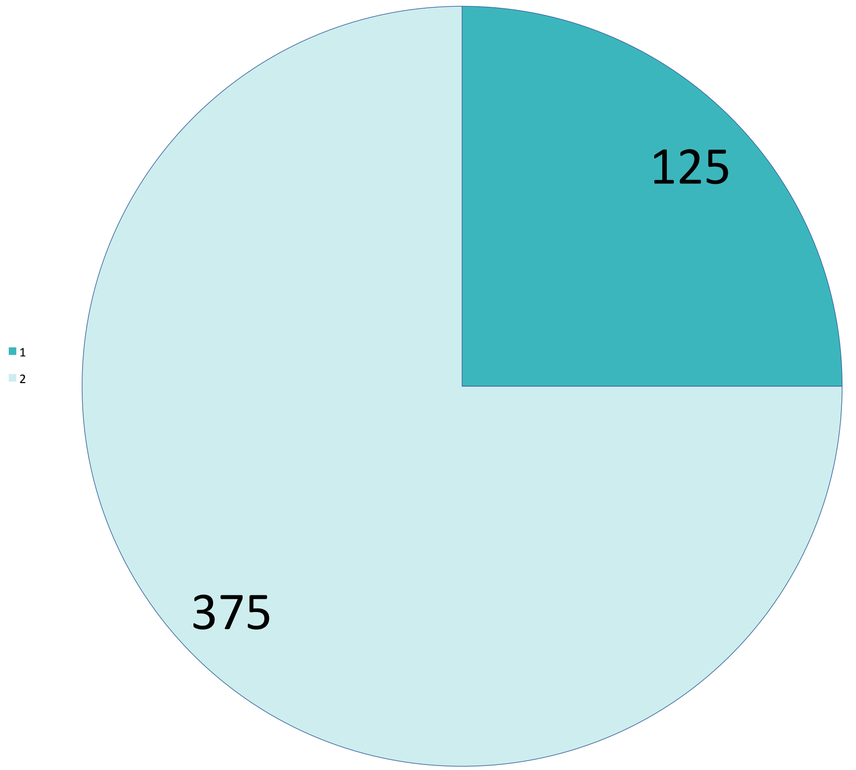
Top 1% of novels by sales volume in unweighted vs sales-weighted samples





METHODOLOGY

Using quantitative data to analyze the field of contemporary fiction

SCALE

Set I comprises metadata on 1244 novels published 1960 to 2013

Set II comprises metadata on 500 novels published 1960 to 2013

(Other sets for comparison comprise metadata on 300 novels published 1960 to 1990 and on 900 films released 1960 to 2014)

VALUE

Set I “Upper Ranges” (selected for high status) includes every novel shortlisted for major best-novel-of-the-year prize

Set II “Everything Else” (selected for high sales/circulation) includes the top 10 bestselling novels in combined US and UK markets for each year

METADATA

Metadata concerning various features of the novels is gathered manually:

Date, Title, Author Name, Year, Prize, Winner (Y/N) or Sales Rank (1-10), Author Identity features (Nationality, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexual Identity), Protagonist Identity features (same), Narrative Voice, Temporal Setting

FIELD

Frequencies of the features, considered separately or as co-incident, are calculated for each half decade

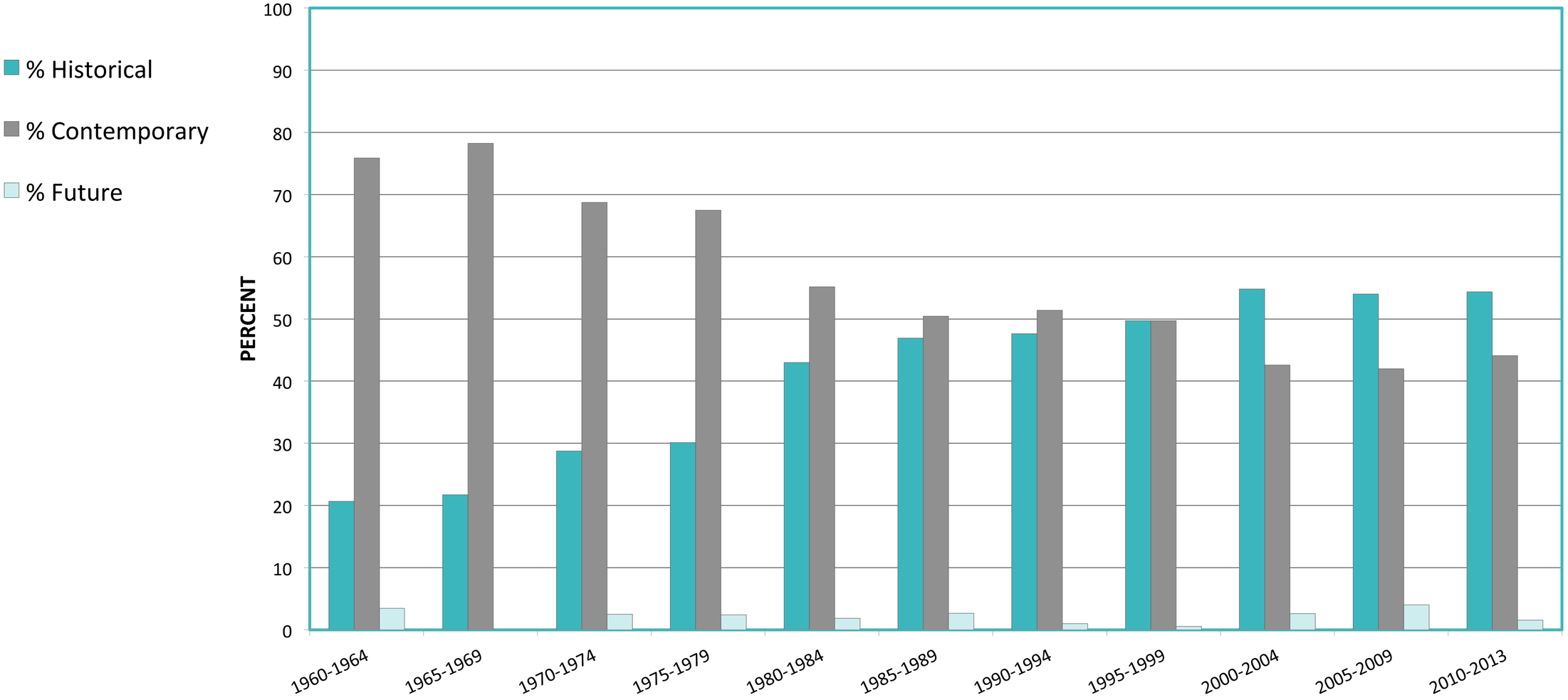
Significant shifts, sharp trendlines are identified

Do the two sets shift in tandem or counter to each other?

Is there a clear turning point when the quantitative relationships begin to align with the norms of the present?

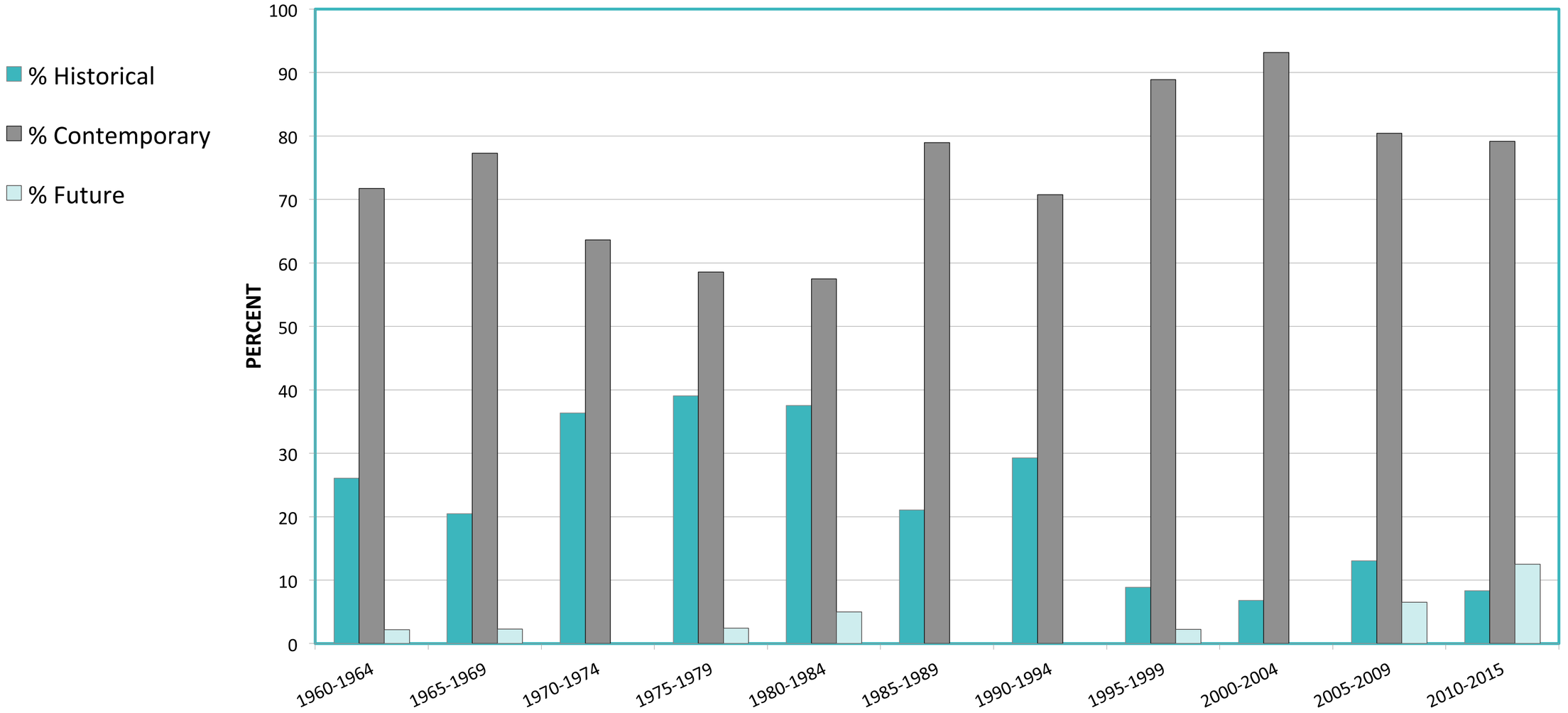
Temporal Settings of Prize-Nominated Novels 1960-2013

Historical, Contemporary, Future

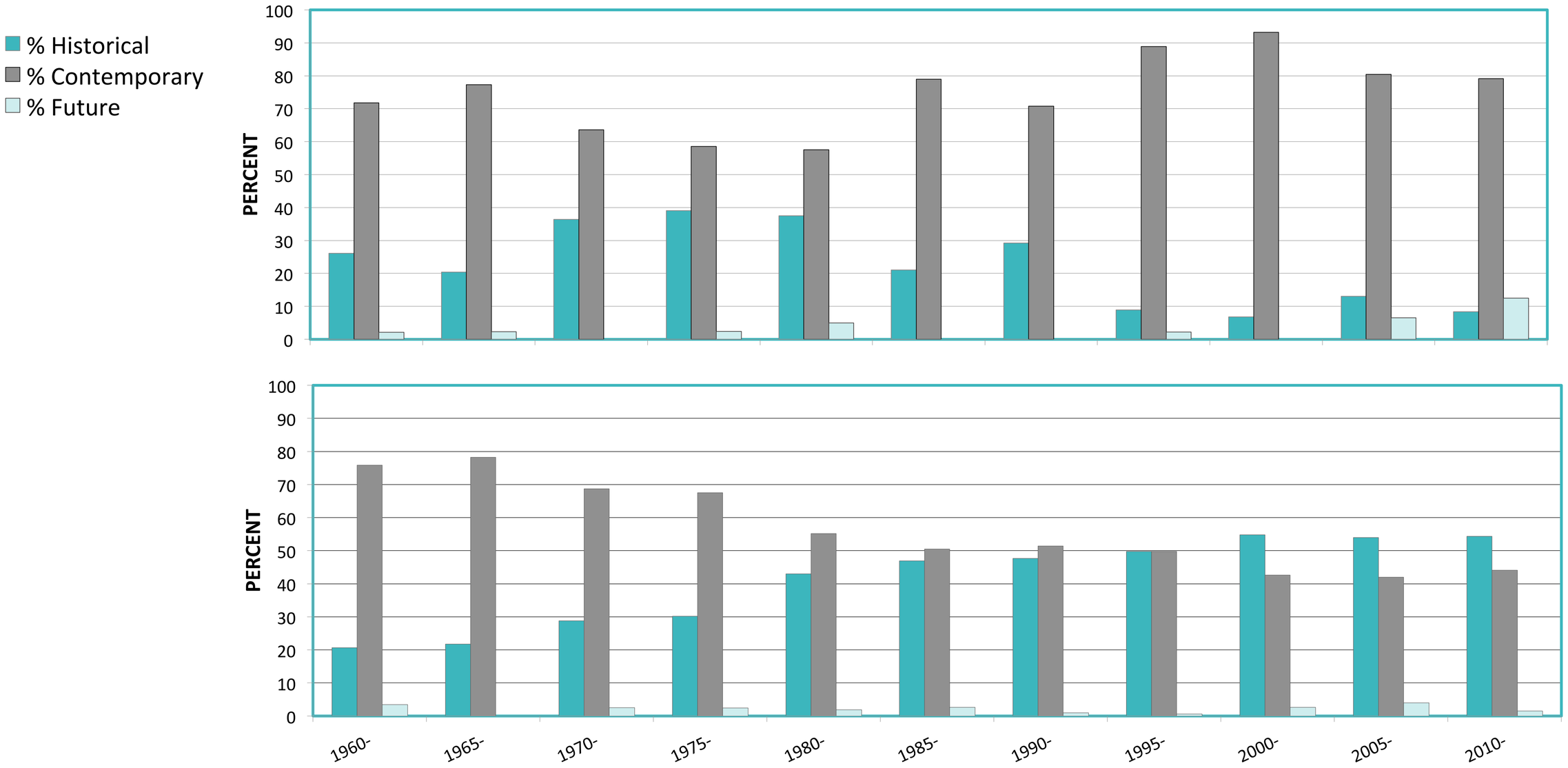


Temporal Settings of Bestsellers 1960-2015

Historical, Contemporary, Future



Temporal Settings of Bestsellers (Above) vs Prize-Shortlisted Novels (Below)



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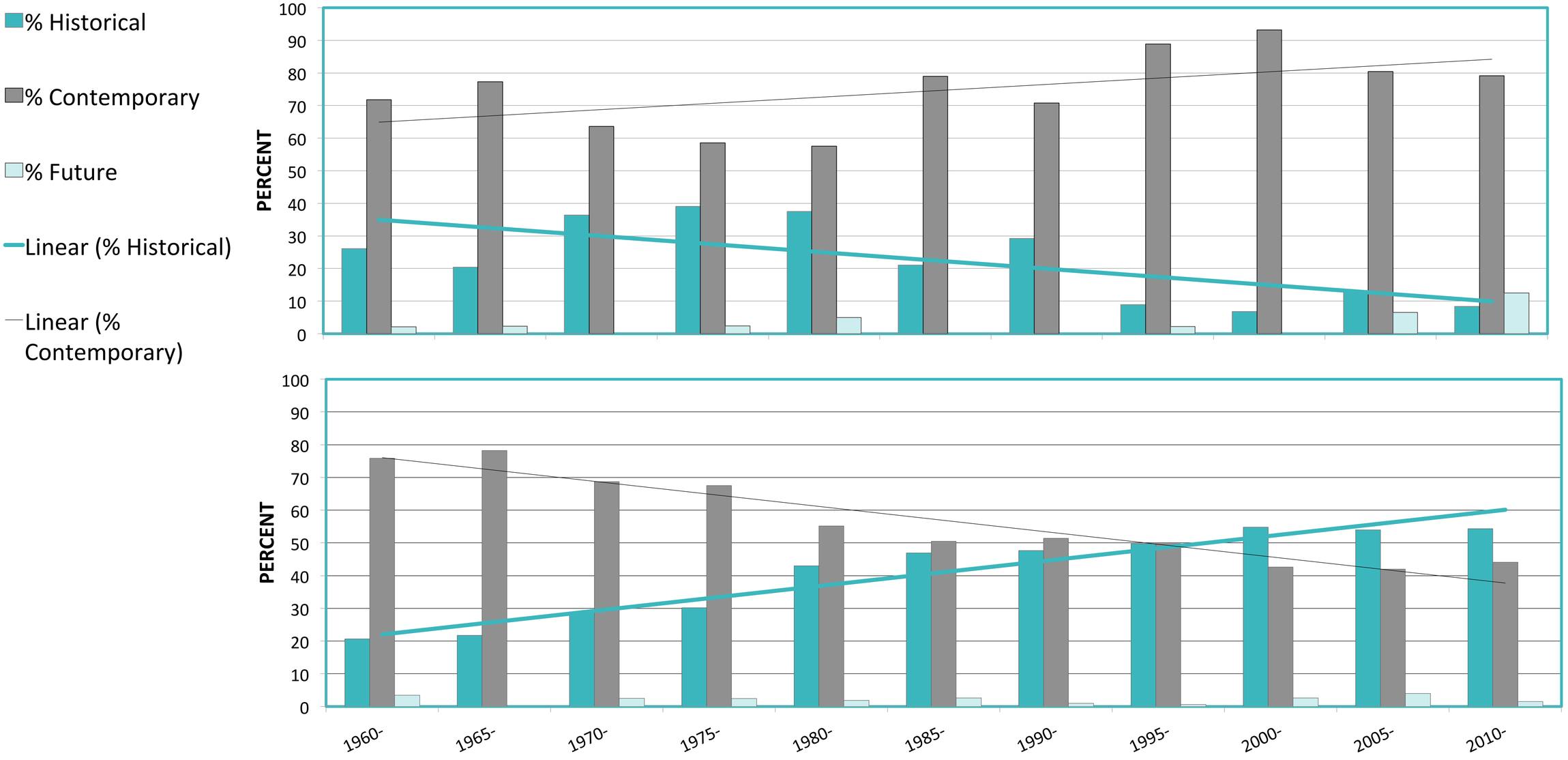
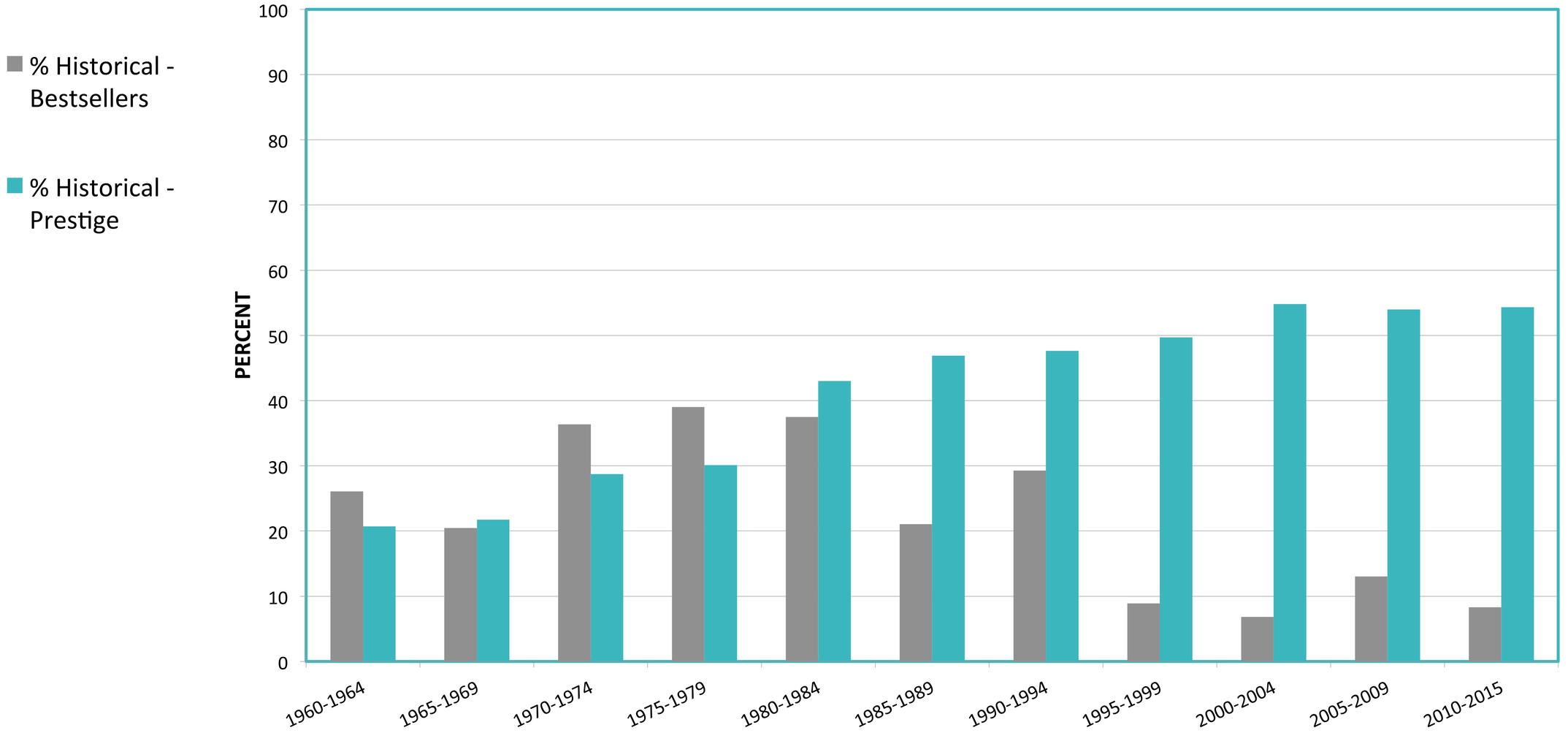


Prize-Nominated Novels vs Bestsellers

Percent set 20 or more years in the past



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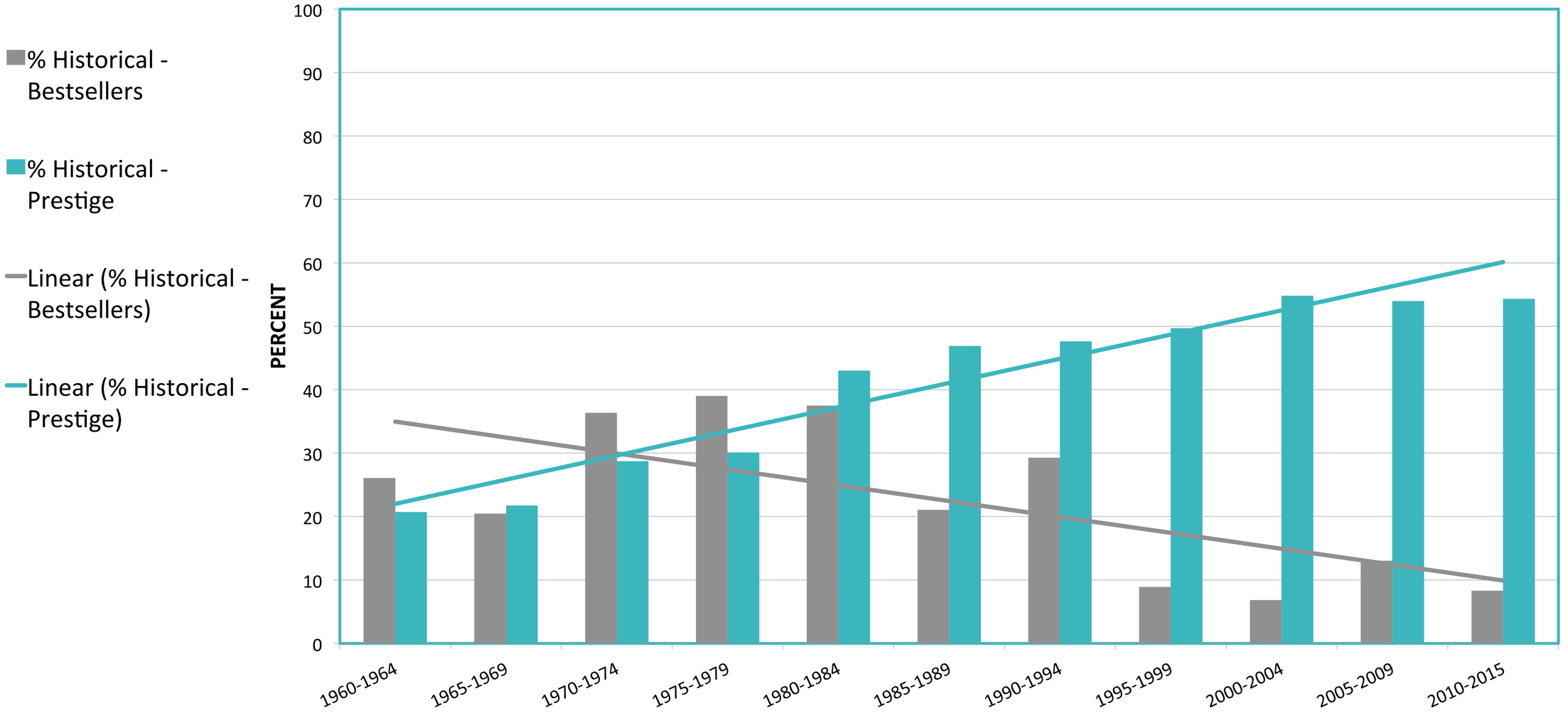

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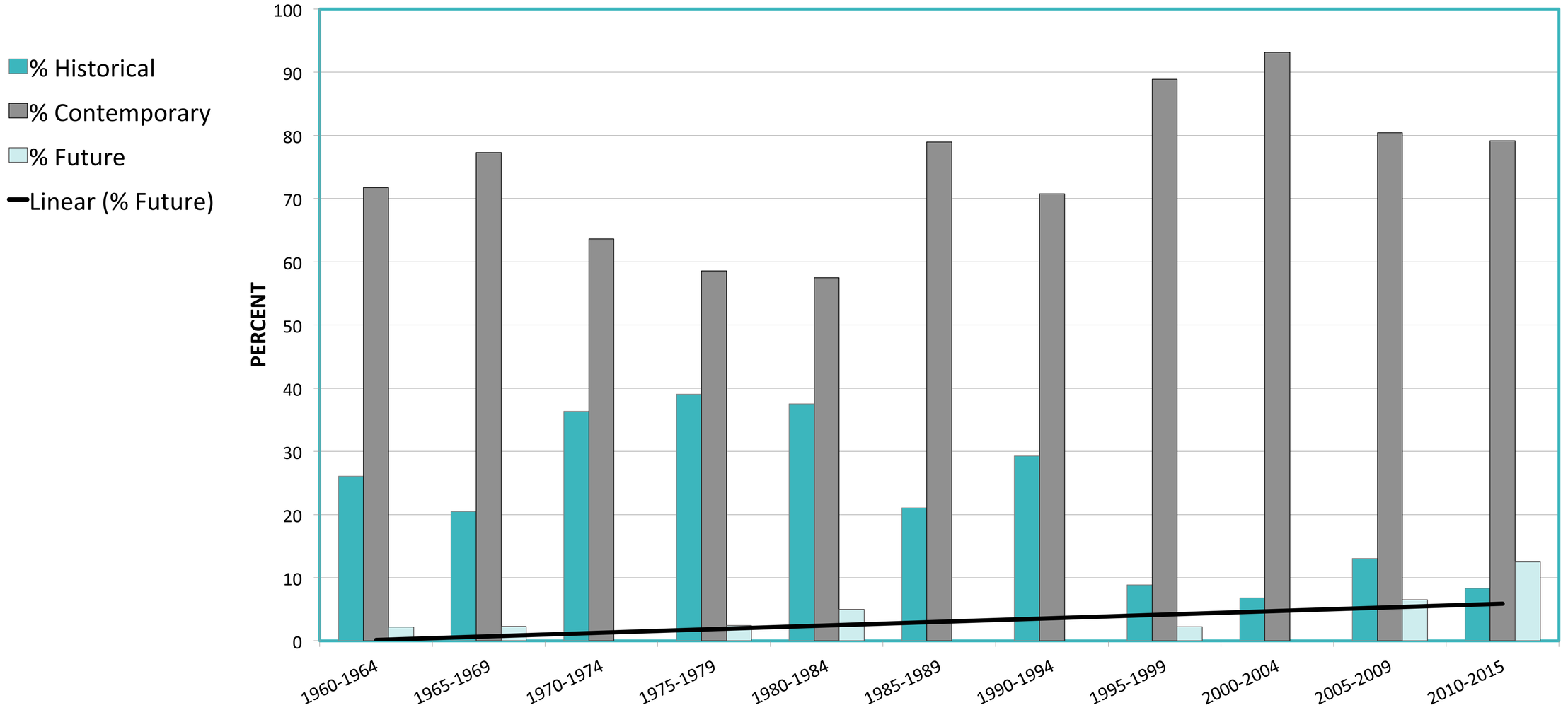

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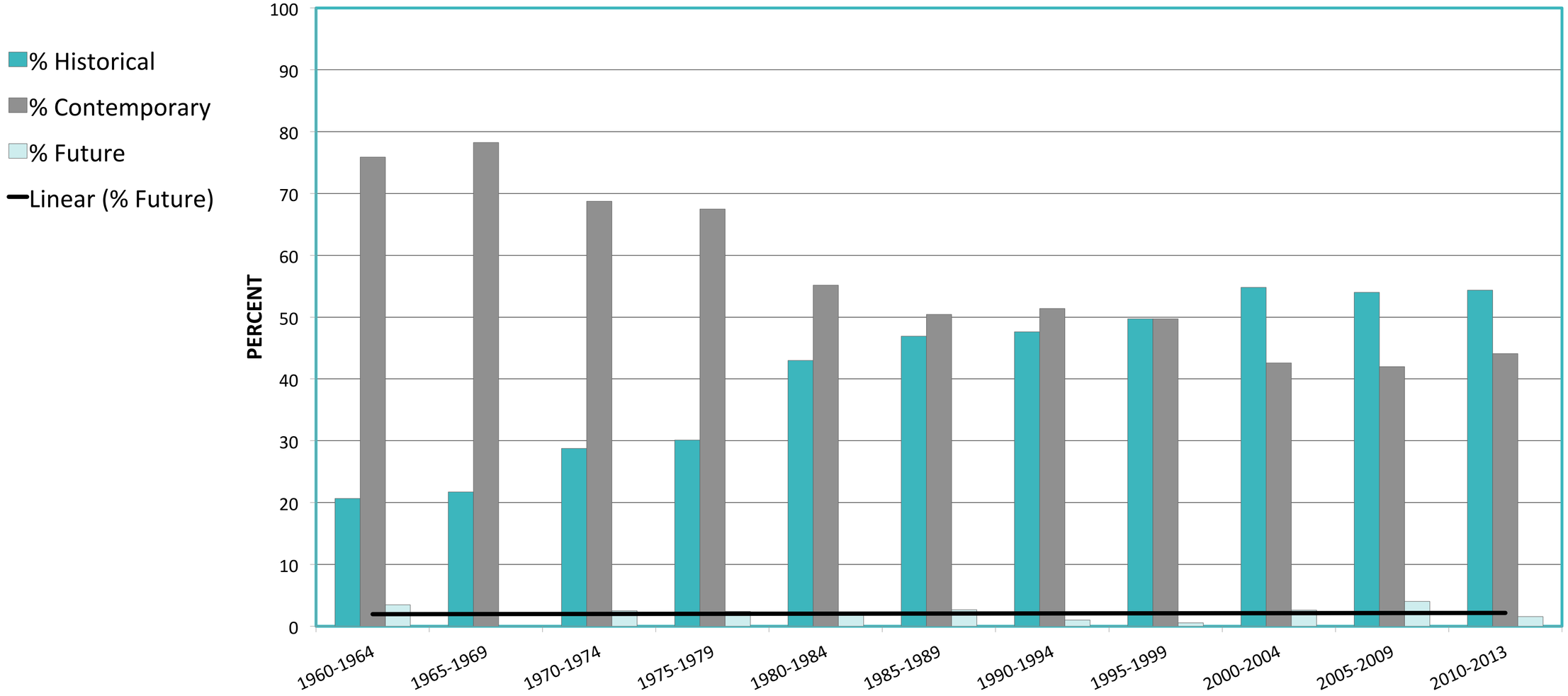
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