



Optimal Transport Barycenter via Nonconvex-Concave Minimax Optimization

Kaheon Kim¹ Rentian Yao² Changbo Zhu¹ Xiaohui Chen³

June 15, 2025

¹Department of ACMS, University of Notre Dame

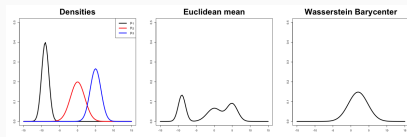
²Department of Mathematics, University of British Columbia

³Department of Mathematics, University of Southern California



ICML
International Conference
On Machine Learning

Optimal Transport (Wasserstein) Barycenter : Average of probability distributions.



Wasserstein Barycenter for $\mu_1, \dots, \mu_n \in \mathcal{P}(\Omega)$ is formulated as

$$\bar{\mu} = \arg \min_{\mu \in \mathcal{P}(\Omega)} \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n W_2^2(\mu, \mu_i)$$

- For 1D distributions, the barycenter $\bar{\mu}$ satisfies $Q_{\bar{\mu}} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n Q_{\mu_i}$.
- No closed-form solution for multivariate distributions

Existing Methodologies (available through POT package)

- Convolutional Wasserstein Barycenter(Cuturi et al 2014)
- Debiased Sinkhorn Barycenter(Janati et al 2020)

Those methods have disadvantage under high resolution settings

- Blurriness Issue due to the regularization
- High Computational complexity of $O(m^2)$ (m : # grids)

Our main contribution lies in

- Resolve Blurriness Issue by targeting exact barycenter
- Efficient Computation with $O(m \log m)$ (m : # grids)

Our formulation : Substituting Wasserstein metric with Kantorovich dual formulation

$$\begin{aligned}\bar{\mu} &= \arg \min_{\nu \in \mathcal{P}(\Omega)} \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n W_2^2(\nu, \mu_i) \\ &= \arg \min_{\nu \in \mathcal{P}(\Omega)} \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \max_{\varphi_i: \text{convex}} \underbrace{\int \left(\frac{\|x\|_2^2}{2} - \varphi_i(x) \right) d\nu(x) + \int \left(\frac{\|y\|_2^2}{2} - \varphi_i^*(y) \right) d\mu_i(y)}_{\mathcal{I}_\nu^{\mu_i}(\varphi_i)}\end{aligned}$$

Nonconvex-concave Minimax problem

$$\min_{\nu \in \mathcal{P}_2^r(\Omega)} \max_{\varphi_i \in \mathbb{F}_{\alpha, \beta}} \mathcal{J}(\nu, \varphi) := \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \mathcal{I}_\nu^{\mu_i}(\varphi_i)$$

- \mathcal{P}_2^r : set of absolutely continuous probability measures whose second order moment is finite
- $\mathbb{F}_{\alpha, \beta}$: a set of α -strongly convex and β -smooth functions
 - $\mathbb{F}_{0, \infty}$: Set of convex functions

Our Approach : Applying Gradient Descent Ascent (Lin et al, 2020)-like algorithm for our Nonconvex-concave Minimax problem

$$\min_{\nu \in \mathcal{P}_2^f(\Omega)} \max_{\varphi_i \in \mathbb{F}_{\alpha, \beta}} \mathcal{J}(\nu, \varphi) := \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \mathcal{I}_{\nu}^{\mu_i}(\varphi_i)$$

Gradients in two different geometric spaces

- (Descent) Wasserstein Gradient (Zemel et al 2019)

$$\nabla \mathcal{J}(\nu, \varphi) = \text{id} - \nabla \bar{\varphi}, \text{ where } \bar{\varphi} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \varphi_i$$

- (Ascent) \dot{H}^1 gradient (Jacobs et al 2020)

$$\nabla_{\varphi_i} \mathcal{J}(\nu, \varphi) = \frac{1}{n} (-\Delta)^{-1} (-\nu + (\nabla \varphi_i^*)_{\#} \mu_i)$$

- $(-\Delta)^{-1}$: Inverse Laplacian Operator
- Solved by Fast Fourier Transform (FFT) : $O(m \log m)$ (m : # grids)

Wasserstein Descent $\dot{\mathbb{H}}^1$ -Ascent(WDHA)

Alternating Wasserstein gradient(descent)/ $\dot{\mathbb{H}}^1$ -gradient(ascent)

Algorithm 3: Wasserstein-Descent $\dot{\mathbb{H}}^1$ -Ascent Algorithm

Initialize ν^1, φ^1 ;

for $t = 1, 2, \dots, T - 1$ **do**

for $i = 1, 2, \dots, n$ **do**

$\widehat{\varphi}_i^{t+1} = \varphi_i^t + \eta \nabla_{\varphi_i} \mathcal{J}(\nu^t, \varphi^t)$;

$\varphi_i^{t+1} = \mathcal{P}_{\mathbb{F}_{\alpha, \beta}}(\widehat{\varphi}_i^{t+1})$;

$\nu^{t+1} = (\text{id} - \tau \mathbb{W} \mathcal{J}(\nu^t, \varphi^t))_{\#} \nu^t$;

return $\{(\nu^t, \varphi^t)\}_{t=1}^T$;

Figure 1: Wasserstein Descent $\dot{\mathbb{H}}^1$ -Ascent

- $\mathcal{P}_{\mathbb{F}_{\alpha, \beta}}$: Projection onto $\mathbb{F}_{\alpha, \beta}$

Definition 1 (Stationary point)

We call $\nu \in \mathcal{P}'_2(\Omega)$ a stationary point of $\mathcal{F}_{\alpha,\beta}$ if $\int_{\Omega} \|\nabla \mathcal{F}_{\alpha,\beta}(\nu)\|_2^2 d\nu = 0$

Theorem 2 (Convergence of WDHA)

Assume that there are constant a and b , such that the density functions satisfy

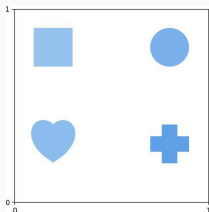
$0 < a \leq \mu_i(x) \leq b < \infty$ for all $i = 1, 2, \dots, n$ and $x \in \Omega$. Recall that $A = a\alpha^d/\beta$ and $B = b\beta^d/\alpha$. If $\max_t \|\nu^t\|_{\infty} \leq V < \infty$ for some constant $V > 0$, by choosing the step sizes (τ, η) satisfying $\eta < 1/B$ and $\tau < \frac{A^2\eta}{A\eta(A\alpha+A+V)+4V\sqrt{4-2A\eta}}$, we have

$$\begin{aligned} \min_{t=1,\dots,T} \int_{\Omega} \|\nabla \mathcal{F}_{\alpha,\beta}\|_2^2 d\nu^t &\leq \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T \int_{\Omega} \|\nabla \mathcal{F}_{\alpha,\beta}(\nu^t)\|_2^2 d\nu^t \\ &\leq \frac{\frac{4\tau V \bar{\delta}^1}{A\eta} + \mathcal{F}_{\alpha,\beta}(\nu^1) - \mathcal{F}_{\alpha,\beta}(\nu^{T+1})}{T\tau/2} \end{aligned}$$

where $\mathcal{F}_{\alpha,\beta}(\nu) := \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \mathcal{I}_{\nu}^{\mu_i}$, $\mathcal{L}^{\mu_i}(\nu) := \max_{\varphi_i \in \mathbb{F}_{\alpha,\beta}} \mathcal{I}_{\nu}^{\mu_i}(\varphi_i)$ and $\bar{\delta}^1 = \bar{\delta}^1(\nu^1, \varphi^1, \mu_1, \dots, \mu_n) > 0$ is a constant.

Experiment 1: Uniform Distributions

- Data: 4 Shape data
- Grid Size: $m = 1024 \times 1024$



Comparisons

- Convolutional Wasserstein Barycenter(CWB)
- Debiased Sinkhorn Barycenter (DSB)
- (Experiment 1) CWB and DSB with Thresholding
 - Removing intensities smaller than the threshold so that the removed intensities amount to 10% of the mass

Experiment 2: Hand Digit Data

- Data: 100 hand-written 8 digits
- Grid Size: $m = 500 \times 500$



Experimental Setting

Algorithm 4: Wasserstein-Descent $\dot{\mathbb{H}}^1$ -Ascent Algorithm

```

Initialize  $\nu^1, \varphi^1$ ;

for  $t = 1, 2, \dots, T - 1$  do
    for  $i = 1, 2, \dots, n$  do
         $\widehat{\varphi}_i^{t+1} = \varphi_i^t + \eta_i^t \nabla_{\varphi_i} \mathcal{J}(\nu^t, \varphi^t)$ ;
         $\varphi_i^{t+1} = (\widehat{\varphi}_i^{t+1})^{**}$ ;
     $\nu^{t+1} = (\text{id} - \tau_t \nabla \mathcal{J})(\nu^t, \varphi^t)_{\#} \nu^t$ ;
return  $\{(\nu^t, \varphi^t)\}_{t=1}^T$ ;

```

Figure 2: Wasserstein Descent $\dot{\mathbb{H}}^1$ -Ascent(Empirical)

- Number of Iteration : $T = 300$
- Stepsize for t -th iteration
 - Wasserstein Descent : $\exp(-t/T)$
 - $\dot{\mathbb{H}}^1$ Ascent : $\eta_i^1 = 1$ and $\eta_{t+1} = 0.99\eta_t$ if $\mathcal{I}_{\nu^t}^{\mu_i}(\varphi_i^{t+1}) < \mathcal{I}_{\nu^t}^{\mu_i}(\varphi_i^t)$
- Convex hull $(\cdot)^{**}$: Computationally efficient compared to $\mathcal{P}_{\mathbb{F}_{\alpha, \beta}}$.

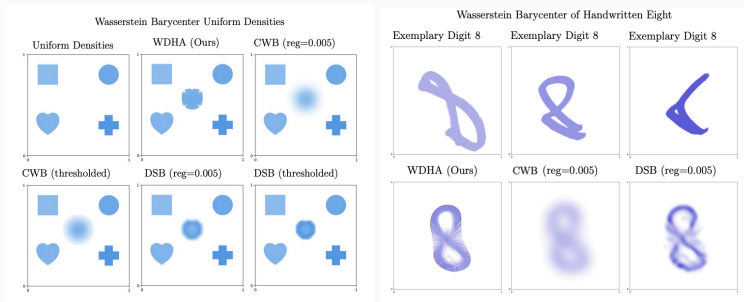


Figure 3: Comparison between methodologies

	CWB	CWB _(thresholded)	DSB	DSB _(Thresholded)	WDHA
$\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n W_2^2(\nu_i^{\text{est}}, \mu_i)$	75.0689	74.7346	74.5804	74.7346	74.5791
Time(s)	3731	3731	7249	7249	676

Table 1: Numerical Comparison between methodologies(Shape Data)

	CWB	DSB	WDHA
Time(s)	10808	11186	3299

Table 2: Numerical Comparison between methodologies(Hand-digit Data)

Thank you!