HMMRATAC: a Hidden Markov ModeleR for ATAC-seq.

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ABSTRACT

ATAC-seq has been widely adopted to identify accessible chromatin regions across the genome.

However, current data analysis still utilizes approaches initially designed for ChIP-seq or DNase-

seq, without taking into account the transposase digested DNA fragments that contain additional

nucleosome positioning information. We present the first dedicated ATAC-seq analysis tool, a

semi-supervised machine learning approach named HMMRATAC. HMMRATAC splits a single

ATAC-seq dataset into nucleosome-free and nucleosome-enriched signals, learns the unique

chromatin structure around accessible regions, and then predicts accessible regions across the

entire genome. We show that HMMRATAC outperforms the popular peak-calling algorithms on

published human and mouse ATAC-seq datasets.

INTRODUCTION

The genomes of all known eukaryotes are packaged into a nucleoprotein complex called

chromatin. The nucleosome is the fundamental, repeating unit of chromatin, consisting of

approximately 147 base pairs of DNA wrapped around an octet of histone proteins(1). The

eviction of nucleosomes into nucleosome-free regions (NFRs) makes DNA more accessible to

various DNA binding factors(2). The binding of these factors to the accessible DNA can exert

spatiotemporal control of gene expression, which is critical in the establishment of cellular identity

during development, cellular responses to stimuli, DNA replication and other cellular

processes(3).

Several assays exist to identify open chromatin regions in a genome-wide manner. These

include DNase-seq, which utilizes the DNase I nuclease(4), FAIRE-seq, which utilizes differences

in polarity between nucleosome-bound and nucleosome-free DNA(5), and ATAC-seq, which uses

a transposase to cut into accessible DNA selectively(6). Although each of these assays identifies

some unique open chromatin regions, they are generally highly correlated in their

identifications(6). Whereas DNase-seq and FAIRE-seq are complex protocols that require, on

average, one million cells, ATAC-seq is a simple three-step protocol, which is optimized for fifty
thousand cells and can be performed on as few as 500 cells or at a single cell level(6,7). ATAC-
seq has become popular over the years, and the Cistrome Database(8), in an effort to collect all
publicly available functional genomics data, has listed nearly 1,500 datasets for human and
mouse.
43
Due to steric hindrance, the Tn5 transposase used in ATAC-seq preferentially inserts into NFRs.
However, it is also possible for the transposase to insert into the linker regions between adjacent
nucleosomes, resulting in larger (over 150bps) DNA fragments, which correspond to the integer
numbers of adjacent nucleosomes. The DNA fragments are constructed in a paired-end library for
sequencing, and after mapping both sequenced ends of each fragment to the genome sequence,
we can infer their fragment lengths according to the observed mapping locations, or the insertion
length. As described in(6), if we plot the observed fragment length versus frequency, we will see
a multi-modal distribution that creates different modes representing transposase insertion into
NFRs and linker regions. This fact allows ATAC-seq to elucidate multiple layers of information
relative to the other assays. Although computational tools exist for DNase-seq, FAIRE-seq and
ChIP-seq(9), that can be and are used for ATAC-seq analysis, such as MACS2(10) and F-
Seq(11), these would fall short since they only utilize a subset of information, usually the
nucleosome-free signals. To date, there are no dedicated peak-callers specifically to account for
ATAC-seq.
58
We present here HMMRATAC, the Hidden Markov ModeleR for ATAC-seq, a semi-supervised
machine learning approach for identifying open chromatin regions from ATAC-seq data. The
principle concept of HMMRATAC is built upon "decomposition and integration", whereby a single
ATAC-seq dataset is decomposed into different layers of signals corresponding to different
chromatin features, and then the relationships between the layers of signals at open chromatin
regions are learned and utilized for pattern recognition. Our method takes advantage of the
unique features of ATAC-seq to identify the chromatin structure more accurately. We found that
HMMRATAC was able to identify chromatin architecture and the most likely transcription factor
binding sites. Additionally, compared with existing methods used for ATAC-seq analysis,
HMMRATAC outperformed them in most tests, including recapitulating active and/or open
chromatin regions identified with other assays.
70
A typical analysis pipeline for ATAC-seq would begin with aligning the sequencing reads to a
reference genome using aligner such as BOWTIE2(12) or BWA(13), followed by identification of
accessible regions or "peaks" by HMMRATAC, and then downstream analysis such as motif
enrichment using MEME(14) or footprint identification in the accessible peaks with

CENTIPEDE(15); differential accessibility analysis with Diffbind(16); and association studies with
other data sets, such as with gene expression data with BETA(17). Quality control
measurements would also take place at each step, such as calculating sequence quality during
the alignment and performing replicate correlation during peak calling(18). We envision
HMMRATAC becoming the principle peak-calling method in such a pipeline.
80
81 **METHODS**
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83 **Preprocessing of ATAC-seq data**
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The human GM12878 cell line ATAC-seq paired-end data used in this study was publicly
available and downloaded under six SRA(19) accession numbers SRR891269-SRR891274.
There are three biological replicates generated using 50,000 cells per replicate and other three
generated using 500 cells per replicate. Each dataset was aligned to the hg19 reference genome
using bowtie2(12). After alignment, each group of replicates (either 50,000 cells or 500 cells)
were merged together, sorted and indexed. Reads that had a mapping quality score below 30 or
that were considered duplicates (exact same start and stop position) were removed from the
merged files. It should be noted that HMMRATAC will remove duplicate and low mapping quality
reads by default, although some other algorithms do not.
94
95 The merged, filtered and sorted BAM files, created as described above, were the input for
96 MACS2. HMMRATAC took the sorted paired-end BAM file and its corresponding BAM index file
97 as the main inputs. F-Seq requires a single-end BED file of alignment results as its input. To
98 generate this BED file, we converted the paired-end BAM file into a BED file, using an in-house
99 script, and split each read pair into forward and reverse strand reads.
100
101 The human monocyte data from(20) was publicly available and downloaded from the Cistrome
102 Database(8) as aligned BAM files to the hg19 reference genome. The data corresponds to Gene
103 Expression Omnibus accessions GSM2325680, GSM2325681, GSM2325686, GSM2325689,
104 and GSM2325690. One replicate per condition was used and processed in the same way as
105 described above, including merging and filtering on the BAM files.
106
107 **The HMMRATAC algorithm**
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The HMMRATAC algorithm is built upon the idea of "decomposition and integration", and based
on the observation of distinct nucleosome organization at accessible chromatin (see **Results**,
Figure 1A, and **Supplemental Figure S1**). A single ATAC-seq dataset is decomposed into

different layers of signals according to the sizes of DNA fragments digested by Tn5 transposase,
and the patterns of the multiple layers of information at the open chromatin regions are learned
and utilized for predicting accessible regions across the whole genome(**Figure 1B**). The detail
steps of HMMRATAC algorithm is described as follows.
116
117   ***Segregation of ATAC-seq signals***
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After the preprocessing step that eliminates duplicate reads and low mapping quality reads, the
main HMMRATAC pipeline (**Figure 1B**) begins by separating the ATAC-seq signal into four
components, each representing a unique feature. These features are nucleosome-free regions
(NFRs), which are most likely to occur within the open chromatin region itself, and three
nucleosomal features, representing mono-, di- and tri-nucleosomes (1Ns, 2Ns, and 3Ns),
respectively. We utilize four distributions to represent the four signal tracks: an exponential
distribution for the nucleosome-free track and three Gaussian distributions to represent the three
nucleosomal signal tracks. These distributions were utilized by Buenrostro et al. to identify their
cutoffs for fragment separations(6). Although sequence read data is discrete, the fact that the
expectation value of each Gaussian is large (>100bp) and the number of observations is high, the
discrete distribution, such as a Poison distribution, can be approximated as a Gaussian. The
mean value of the exponential distribution for NFRs is set as a fixed value at runtime, either as
the default value or a user-defined value. The parameters of three Gaussian distributions are
initialized at runtime with default or user-defined values and then updated using the expectation
maximization (EM) algorithm for Gaussian mixture models. These initial values were the same as
those used by Buenrsotro et al. to define their distributions for the chromatin features. Briefly,
each nucleosomal fragment, those larger than 100bp, is classified as belonging to one of the
nucleosomal distributions based on its weighted probability. Once each fragment has been
classified, new means, standard deviations, and weights are calculated for each distribution and
become the new values for the mixture model. This process continues iteratively until the change
in the mean values between iterations is less than a reasonable epsilon value. At this point, the
model is assumed to have reached convergence, and the EM process is halted (**Figure 1C**). In
order to decrease the time required for the EM algorithm, HMMRATAC randomly sub-selects
10% of all the fragments to use as the training data. Once the parameters of the four distributions
have been determined, HMMRATAC creates four genome-wide signal tracks. For every genomic
position, all of the fragments that occupy that position are determined. Each track is then
incremented by the probability that a particular fragment belongs to the tracks' corresponding
distribution. The signal tracks are then transformed by square root into continuous space.
147

148 ***Training the Hidden Markov Model of accessible chromosomal regions, and refining the***
149 ***model with the Baum-Welch algorithm***
150
Once the four signal tracks have been created, the main HMMRATAC process begins.
HMMRATAC first identifies up to 1000 training regions throughout the genome, with which it
learns the model. These training regions are determined by scanning the genome for regions
whose read coverage fold changes over background falls within a certain range. The default
lower and upper limit of fold changes, as used in the Result section, is set between 10 and 20.
These regions are then extended by 5KB in either direction. It is also possible for users to
provide a BED file containing predefined training regions. The initial HMM has proportional initial
probabilities, which are not updated during training, as well as proportional transition probabilities,
which are updated during training. The emission probabilities are calculated with k-means
clustering, by separating the training regions into 3 clusters and calculating the means and
covariance matrices for the four signal tracks for each cluster. We model the emissions as a
multivariate Gaussian distribution since this assumption has been successfully adopted in other
HMM-based genome segmentation methods such as hiHMM(21,22) and Segway(23,24). The
three clusters represent the three states of our model, corresponding to the *center* of the open
region with overall high enrichment of all of the four types of signals, the *nucleosomes* with low
NFR signal but moderate nucleosomal signals, and a *background* state with low enrichment of
any signals, respectively. It is also possible to create a model using a different number of states
instead of 3, although this option is not generally recommended. Once this initial HMM is created,
the transition and emission parameters are updated with the Baum-Welch algorithm(25) until
convergence (**Figure 1D**).
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172 ***Annotating with the Viterbi algorithm***
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Once the HMM has been created and refined, the Viterbi algorithm(26) is used to classify every
genomic position into one of the three states of our model. In our experience, Viterbi has trouble
when encountering a very high coverage region. Therefore, regions whose z-scored coverage is
above a certain cutoff, either a default or user-defined value, are masked by the Viterbi algorithm.
Additionally, it is possible to include a list of genomic regions to mask along with the extremely
high coverage regions, such as annotated blacklisted sites provided by the ENCODE project. We
have found that 91% of the high coverage regions that are masked from the Viterbi algorithm in
the   GM12878   cells   are   annotated   blacklist   regions   (downloaded   from
http://hgdownload.cse.ucsc.edu/goldenPath/hg19/encodeDCC/wgEncodeMapability/wgEncodeD
acMapabilityConsensusExcludable.bed.gz). A genome-wide BedGraph of all state annotations
can be reported by HMMRATAC, although this is not the default behavior. By default,

HMMRATAC will take all regions classified as belonging to the *center* state and whose length is
above a default or user-defined threshold and merge them with the *nucleosome* states located
both upstream and downstream of the *center* state. We generally consider the nearby
nucleosomes to be part of the regulatory region (See **Results**), and therefore the region is then
reported as a peak in gappedPeak format
(https://genome.ucsc.edu/FAQ/FAQformat.html#format14). Each reported region is given a
score, which represents the maximum read coverage of the *center* state. Additionally,
HMMRATAC also supplies a file containing the summits of each region. To calculate a summit,
HMMRATAC first filters the read coverage signal throughout the *center* state using a Gaussian
smoothing function with a window size of 120bp. It then calculates the position that has the
maximum read coverage and reports that position as the summit.
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197 ***Software implementation***
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HMMRATAC software is implemented using JAVA language. It should be noted that at all stages
of the algorithm, HMMRATAC does not store the read or coverage information in memory. Any
information needed by the program is read from the desired file and used at the specific time.
This was incorporated to reduce the memory usage of HMMRATAC. However, because of this
feature, it is not recommended to run HMMRATAC simultaneously with the same data files. It is,
however, possible to process multiple different data sets in parallel. In terms of system
requirements, the only required component is to have Java 7 or higher installed. We have tested
HMMRATAC on OpenJDK 7, standard edition JRE 8 and the standard edition JRE 10. In terms
of hardware requirement, although all results involved in this study were generated on our server
equipped with AMD Opteron(tm) Processor 6378 and 500GB memory, HMMRATAC can
successfully process human ATAC-seq datasets on modest personal computers such as the
author's laptop equipped with a 2.8GHz Intel Core i7 processor and 16 GB of DDR3 memory.
The actual maximum memory usage and the runtime of HMMRATAC mainly depend on the
parameter settings. As an example, when the window size for Viterbi decoding (option --window)
was set to 2,500 kbps, the maximum memory usage decreased from 24GB, when using the
default window size of 25,000 kbps, down to 13 GB, on the same merged GM12878 dataset.
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216 **Evaluation**
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218 ***Calls from MACS2***
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MACS version 2.1 was used to call peaks using the sorted paired-end BAM files created as
described above. With each run the input file format (option -f) was set to "BAMPE" and the

option for keeping duplicate reads (option --keep-dup) was set to "all", as duplicate reads had
already been discarded in pre-processing. MACS2 was run with the local lambda option turned
off (option --nolambda) and was run with q-value cutoffs (option -q) set to 0.5, 0.1, 0.05 (default),
0.005, 0.0005 and 0.00005. It was also run with a p-value cutoff (option -p) set to 0.6 and 0.3.
226
227   ***Calls from F-Seq***
228
229   F-Seq version 1.84 was used to call peaks using the single-end BED files created as described
230   previously. With each run, the output was reported as a BED file (option -of). The standard
231   deviation cutoff (option -t) was set to 0.1, 1, 4 (default), 6, 7, 8, 10, 15 and 20.
232
233   ***Calls from HMMRATAC***
234
HMMRATAC version 1.1 was used to call peaks using the sorted BAM file. The upper limit fold-
change for choosing training regions (option -u) was set to 20 with corresponding lower limits
(option -l) set to 10. These settings are the HMMRATAC defaults. The blacklisted sites for hg19
were provided, which were masked from the program and all subsequent steps. For the
precision, recall and false positive rate calculations, the HMMRATAC peaks were filtered by
minimum score cutoffs of 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40 and 45. Additionally, for two monocyte
samples (accession numbers GSM2325689 – RPMI_4h and GSM2325681 – BG_d1)
HMMRATAC did not produce a typical model with the default settings (-u 20 –l 10). Instead, the
models produced showed the nucleosome state as having the highest NFR signal. We re-ran
these samples with more conservative settings (-u 40 –l 20), at which time HMMRATAC
produced models that showed the characteristic pattern that we have seen with the other
samples. These peak results from HMMRATAC were then filtered by the same cutoffs as the
other samples and tested in the same way. All the transition and emission parameters learned by
HMMRATAC from GM12878 50k cells, 500 cells, five human monocyte samples are summarized
in **Supplemental Table S2**.
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251   ***Compiling the "Gold Standard" lists and "True Negative" set***
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We tested the performance of HMMRATAC and other methods on ATAC-seq datasets of
GM12878 cells against three proxies of "gold standard" datasets. The first one, which we call
"active regions", is made by combining two chromatin states "Active Promoters" and "Strong
Enhancers" generated in GM12878 cells using chromHMM[27,28] (downloaded from UCSC
genome browser track wgEncodeBroadHmmGm12878HMM). The other two sets were DNaseI
hypersensitive sites (UCSC track wgEncodeAwgDnaseUwdukeGm12878UniPk) and FAIRE

accessible regions (wgEncodeOpenChromFaireGm12878Pk)(29) called from DNase-seq and
FAIRE-seq on the GM12878 cell line. Because the DNase-seq and FAIRE-seq regions were
called by the ENCODE project(30) from traditional methods including Hotspot(31) and F-Seq, the
evaluation based on either of them is less unbiased compared with the test based on chromatin
states which integrate multiple independent experiments. We found that there were numerous
cases throughout the genome where clusters of DNaseI or FAIRE regions were in close proximity
to one another. These clusters tended to have broad enrichment in either DNase-seq or FAIRE-
seq signals. Therefore, we merged all DNaseI or FAIRE regions that were within 2KB of each
other into a single region and used these merged sets as the proxies to the gold standard.
268
The "real negative" set was made with the "Heterochromatin" state annotation from chromHMM.
When using the "active region" set as "gold standard", no modifications were necessary because
the three states are mutually exclusive. When using either the DNaseI or FAIRE sets, any
"heterochromatin" states that overlapped (by any amount) a DNaseI or FAIRE region were
excluded from the final "real negative" set. Additionally, any DNaseI or FAIRE peak that
overlapped any "heterochromatin" state (by any amount) was, likewise, excluded from its
respective "gold standard" set.
276
The "gold standard" set used for the human monocyte ATAC-seq data were compiled as follows.
For each condition, 2 replicates of H3K27ac, H3K4me1 and H3K4me3 ChIP-seq datasets, one
replicate of H3K9me3 from the same study(20) were downloaded from the Cistrome Database(8)
as aligned BAM files. Each file was processed by MACS2 with the p-value parameter (-p option)
set to 0.15. The resulting peaks were sorted by the –log10(FDR) value and the top 10000 peaks
for each sample were kept. The "active regions" true set was created as the genomic regions
overlapped with either H3K27ac, H3K4me1 or H3K4me3 but not overlapped with H3K9me3
peaks. This list of "active regions" became the proxy of "gold standard" set for each condition.
Any H3K9me3 peak that did not overlap the "active region" set was kept as the "real negative" set
for that condition. The accession numbers for all above histone modification ChIP-seq data are
listed in **Supplemental Table S3**.
288
289   ***Calculating Precision, Recall, False Positive Rate and Area Under the Curves***
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Let Predicted Positive (PP) represent the number of base pairs identified as accessible regions
from any method. Let Real Positives (RP) represent the number of base pairs in the "gold
standard" sets. Let Real Negatives (RN) represent the number of base pairs in the "real
negative" set. Let True Positive (TP) represent the number of overlapping base pairs between a

called peak and a real positive. Let False Positive (FP) represent the number of overlapping
base pairs between a called peak and a real negative.

Then the *precision* or positive predictive value (PPV) is calculated as PPV = TP/(TP+FP). The
Recall, or true positive rate (TPR), is calculated as TPR = TP/RP. The *false positive rate* (FPR) is
calculated as FPR = FP/RN. The number of overlapping base pairs was calculated with the
BEDTools intersect tool(32). After the precisions, recalls and false positive rates were calculated
for accessible regions predicted by a given method under various cutoff values, the approximate
area under the curve (AUC) was calculated for the *recall* vs. *false positive rate* (ROC) curves and
for the *precision-recall* (PR) curves, after adding extreme points to the unreachable ends of the
curves. The extreme points to the ROC curves are TPR=0 and FPR=0, and TPR=1 and FPR=1;
the extreme points to the PR curves are TPR=0 and PPV=1, and TPR=1 and PPV=L_{true}/(L_{true} +
L_{false}) where the L_{true} is the total length of real positive set and the L_{false} is the total length of the
real negative set.

RESULTS

The distinctive pattern of ATAC-seq fragments around known accessible elements

In order to investigate the ATAC-seq signal profile around accessible genomic regions, we took
the ATAC-seq data in the human GM12878 cell line from Buenrostro et al. (6)and separated the
fragments into short nucleosome-free (under 100bp) and mono-nucleosome (180-250bp)
fragments based on cutoffs identified by Buenrostro et al. These cutoffs were determined by
fitting the fragment length distribution to several simulated distributions modeling nucleosome and
nucleosome-free transposition frequencies(6). We plotted the two types of fragments around the
centers of DNaseI hypersensitive sites (DHSs) in the same cell line, identified by ENCODE(30)
(**Supplemental Figure S1**). We observed a clear, symmetrical pattern around the centers of
these sites characterized by an enrichment of the nucleosome-free fragments and flanking
enrichment of the mono-nucleosome fragments. We were able to visually discern at least three
distinct regions around an open site: 1) the *center*, characterized by an enrichment of
nucleosome-free fragments and flanked by nucleosome fragments; 2) the *nucleosome regions*,
characterized by an enrichment of nucleosome fragments; 3) and the *background*, characterized
by a depletion in any fragments (**Figure 1A; Supplemental Figure S1**). Based on this
observation and existing knowledge on the nucleosome positioning around the accessible
chromatin (2), we hypothesized that such pattern would exist at the open chromatin throughout
the genome and that by learning and recognizing this pattern computationally in a single ATAC-

seq dataset, we would identify the open chromatin regions with higher confidence than any other
existing method.

Signal decomposition through the probabilistic approach

In the first ATAC-seq paper by Buenrostro et al., the authors separated the fragments according
to their insertion lengths into four populations representing those from the NFRs and those
spanning 1, 2 or 3 nucleosomes(6). Non-overlapping and non-adjacent cutoffs were used. For
example, lengths below 100 bp represent nucleosome-free signals and lengths between 180 and
250 bp represents mono-nucleosome signals. We consider such cutoff-based strategy not a
general practice for the following two reasons. First, different species or different cell lines may
have different nucleosome spacing and these differences may not be adequately
understood(33,34). Secondly, since the fragments whose size falls between the non-overlapping
and non-adjacent cutoffs are discarded (e.g. those between 100 and 180 bp long), the recall (or
sensitivity) to identify accessible regions will be reduced (**Supplemental Figure S2**). As a fact,
about 15% of the entire data generated from the original paper are ignored with their strategy. We
addressed the above two challenges in a probabilistic approach in HMMRATAC.

First, we let the data itself identify the optimal parameters for the four different distributions of
fragment lengths. Using the distributional assumptions of Buenrostro et al., we create four
distributions to represent four different chromatin features: nucleosome-free regions (NFRs),
mono-nucleosomes (1Ns), di-nucleosomes (2Ns) and tri-nucleosomes (3Ns). HMMRATAC uses
a mixture model and Expectation-Maximization (EM) algorithm to identify optimum parameters.
As an example, HMMRATAC identified the optimum fragment lengths representing 1Ns, 2Ns, and
3Ns from ATAC-seq data in the human GM12878 cell line(6), generated by merging three
replicates, as being 195bp, 396bp, and 693bp, respectively (**Figure 1C**). As a demonstration of
different nucleosome spacing in different datasets, HMMRATAC determined the optimum
fragment lengths for the 1Ns, 2Ns, and 3Ns from ATAC-seq data in human monocytes treated
with RPMI for one day(20) as 186bp, 368bp, and 549bp, respectively. Additionally, the values for
any of the individual replicates, in the GM12878 data, were never more than 5bp off from the
average values listed above for the merged datasets (**Supplemental Figure S3**). Not all ATAC-
seq datasets show a clear multi-modal pattern, especially datasets from fewer cells. As an
example, the fragment distribution generated by Buenrostro and et al. utilizing 500 cells
(GM12878 cells) per-replicate, did not show as clear of a distribution as 50,000 cells per replicate
(**Supplemental Figure S4A and S4B**). However, we found our approach can robustly identify the
parameters even if the multi-modal pattern is not clear. As we can see from **Figure 1C**, the mean
and standard deviation values converged after no more than 12 iterations and the parameters

converged to very similar values for either the 50,000-cell per-replicate or 500 cell per-replicate
datasets.
370
Secondly, we propose in HMMRATAC a probabilistic approach to make use of data from the
entire spectrum of fragment lengths. We generate four distinct signal profiles in 10bp resolution,
for NFRs, 1Ns, 2Ns, and 3Ns, allowing each mapped fragment to contribute to all profiles with
different weights corresponding to its particular fragment length. For each genomic location that is
occupied by a particular fragment, all four signal profiles are incremented by the probabilities that
this fragment, assigned with an observed fragment length through read mapping, belongs to each
of the four corresponding distributions. We tested the performance of a regular HMMRATAC
approach with this probabilistic method utilizing the entire data and an alternative approach
utilizing only the subset of data satisfying the cutoffs proposed in Buenrostro et al. The two
approaches were compared in terms of precision and recall against the "active regions" true set
(**Supplemental Figure S2**). We found that our probabilistic method had considerably better
recall and precision compared to the cutoff based method. This result proved that the traditional
way to discard reads between cutoffs of fragment sizes would hurt the prediction power.
384
HMMRATAC utilizes the length of an insertion fragment, identified by paired-end sequencing, as
an essential and critical piece of information in its processes. As such, HMMRATAC can only be
used in paired-end sequencing libraries that have not undergone stringent size selection, either
physical or computational. Because we observed a decrease in the performance of our method
when we used the cutoff based approach, which resulted in the removal of ~15% of all
sequencing reads, we wanted to understand the effects of size selection and paired-end
sequencing on ATAC-seq peak calling. We performed two *in silico* size selections on the data
from Buenrostro et al. The first restricted the fragments to those whose length was under 100bp
and the second restricted the fragments to those with lengths under 300bp. We also treated the
data as single-end, by unpairing the read mate pairs. We then used MACS2(10) to call peaks
with each data set, including the original unaltered data and compared the performance to predict
the accessible chromatin (**Supplemental Figure S5**). As a result, the original unaltered data
performed the best in terms of precision and recall. This indicates that an ATAC-seq assay
should be performed without a size selection step and the resulting fragments should undergo
paired-end sequencing, regardless of the peak calling algorithm that is used.
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401 **Integration through Hidden Markov Model**
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After removing reads with low mapping quality, and masking blacklist regions from downstream
analysis, HMMRATAC identifies a set of training regions throughout the genome to train a 3-

states Hidden Markov Model (HMM) with multivariate Gaussian emissions, representing the

underlying three chromatin states of 1) the *center* of open chromatin, 2) the *nucleosome regions*

and 3) the *background* (**Figure 1A**). By default, training regions can be either specified by users

or automatically selected where the signal fold-change above background falls within a

predetermined range. After signal decomposition, a matrix of 10bp resolution signals for NFRs,

1Ns, 2Ns, and 3Ns in training regions is used to train the parameters in HMM through the Baum-

Welch algorithm(25). The initial state transition probabilities are set equally as 0.33 and the

emission parameters for each state are calculated after clustering all locations in the training

regions into 3 classes (see **Methods** for detail). **Figure 1D** shows the final parameters for the

HMM on ATAC-seq in the GM12878 cell line, by merging three replicates from 50k cells(6).

Although the parameters will change depending on the choice of training regions and the

datasets provided, several key characteristics are evident in the model and remain mostly stable

with different settings and data. State 3 in the HMM model, which HMMRATAC annotated as the

center state, showed the highest average signal across the four signal profiles.   State 2,

annotated as the *nucleosome* state, showed the second highest average values. Additionally, as

we hypothesized, the results show the *center* state mainly transits from or to the *nucleosome*

state.

After learning the model, HMMRATAC takes a matrix of genome-wide NFRs, 1Ns, 2Ns, and 3Ns

signals and labels each genomic location with one of the states using the Viterbi algorithm(26).

On the 50K cells ATAC-seq data in GM12878 cell line, there were about 4.3 million regions

annotated as *background* with an average size of 288 bps (~35% of human genome), about 4.5

million regions annotated as *nucleosomes* with an average size of 382 bps (~49% of human

genome), and about 226 thousand regions annotated as *center regions* with an average size of

504 bps (~3% of human genome). HMMRATAC finally connected the *center regions* with their

adjacent *nucleosomes* and called a total of 87,440 accessible regions with an average size of

1,831 bps (5% of human genome), excluding those with abnormally high coverage and those

below a minimum length. It should be noted that many of the *nucleosomes* are not adjacent to the

center state. These may represent non-regulatory nucleosomes that ATAC-seq is able to identify

or may be artifacts due to increased transposition frequency.

Recapitulating chromatin architecture at functional elements

We hypothesized that HMMRATAC could identify chromatin architecture around accessible

regions, or ideally, nucleosomes near the regulatory elements. To prove this, we explored the

distribution of histone modification ChIP-seq signal around our identified accessible regions. We

downloaded and analyzed datasets released by ENCODE in the GM12878 cell line(30), including

ChIP-seq for CTCF, active histone marks such as H3K4me1, H3K4me3, H3K9ac, and H3K27ac,
and repressive histone marks such as H3K9me3 and H3K27me3, as well as sequencing of
micrococcal nuclease digestion (MNase-seq). **Figure 2A** shows two loci, one on chromosome 8
that was identified as an accessible region by MACS2 and F-Seq but not HMMRATAC and
another locus on chromosome 2 that was identified as accessible by all three methods. At the
chromosome 2 locus, we observed that the *center* state was located in regions characterized by
depletion in both active histone marks and MNase digestion. The surrounding *nucleosome* states
showed enrichment of active histone marks and MNase digestion. We next plotted the same
ChIP-seq, DNase-seq and MNase-seq data around all distal (> 10kb from any gene promoter)
center states and used k-means clustering to group the resulting profiles (**Figure 2B**). We found
that HMMRATAC states can identify, what appear to be, different types of regulatory elements.
For example, the first cluster (C1) characterized by strong enrichment of H3K27ac relative to
H3K4me1 seems to indicate active enhancers while the third cluster (C3) marked by high levels
of H3K4me1 and more moderate levels of H3K27ac would suggest weak or poised enhancers
(**Figure 2B**). The second cluster (C2), characterized by strong enrichment of CTCF binding,
lower levels of H3K4me1, H3K4me3 and acetylation histone marks and a higher level of
H3K27me3, seems to suggest that this cluster represents insulators or domain boundaries. The
fourth cluster (C4), similar to C2, suggested accessible regions also exist in the DNA elements
with repressive functions in euchromatin, potentially bound by factors rather than CTCF. To
summarize, these results indicate that HMMRATAC recapitulates the histone architecture around
accessible regions.
463
The chromosome 8 locus exemplifies some of the advantages of HMMRATAC over other peak
callers. Both MACS2 and F-Seq identified this locus as being accessible, despite the lack of
other corroborating evidence, such as transcription factor binding and the presence of active
chromatin states. It appears that these methods called the site because of an enrichment of the
mono-nucleosome signal. Because neither MACS2 or F-Seq integrate the various chromatin
features present in ATAC-seq data and because they are based on signal enrichment only, as
opposed to HMMRATAC which incorporates the structure of the element, they both falsely
identified this region as accessible, while HMMRATAC identified the region as being a
nucleosome state.
473
In order to understand the chromatin features that are enriched in each state across the genome,
as the unique result HMMRATAC concluded from a single ATAC-seq data, we plotted the overlap
of the 3 hidden states with chromHMM states and histone mark calls from ChIP-seq in the
GM12878 cell line based on ENCODE data (**Figure 3A; Supplemental Table S1**). We found that
the chromatin states "Active Promoters", "Strong Enhancer", "Insulator", "Poised Promoter" and

"Weak Promoter" states mainly overlap with our *center* state, and the "Heterochromatin",
"Repetitive", "Repressed", "Transcription Elongation", and "Weak Transcription" barely overlaps
with the *center* state. Interestingly, the "Strong Enhancer" state had a similar amount of overlap
with the *nucleosome* state as the *center* state. Combined with our observation that our
nucleosome state showed elevated levels of active histone marks near accessible regions, we
hypothesized that this state may represent regulatory nucleosomes, those marked by active
histone modifications and adjacent to accessible regions. We plotted the H3K4me1 active
histone mark around the centers of our *center* states as well as around the centers of the
adjacent *nucleosome* states, those directly flanking our *center* states (**Figure 3B**). As we can
see, the *center* states show a bimodal enrichment for the histone mark, consistent with MACS2
and F-Seq peaks. Additionally, our adjacent *nucleosome* states show central enrichment for the
histone mark. This indicates that the *nucleosome* state, at least those adjacent to our *center*
states, are likely regulatory nucleosomes. As a result, HMMRATAC merges the *center* states
with their adjacent *nucleosome* states, both upstream and downstream, to identify the regulatory
region as the output.

Functional regulatory elements that harbor transcription factor binding sites are generally under
higher evolutionary constraint(35). Success in transcription factor ChIP-seq data analysis is often
benchmarked by high PhastCons score, a precompiled evolutionary conservation score at every
base pair(36), at the peak center or summit, relative to the surrounding regions(37). We found
that the summits of accessible regions detected by HMMRATAC in GM12878 cell line also
showed PhastCons enrichment in vertebrates (**Figure 3C**), indicating that these summits were
likely locations of evolutionarily conserved regulatory elements and could represent functional
regulatory elements.

Method comparison with MACS2 and F-Seq

We next sought to compare the performance of HMMRATAC in identifying open chromatin
regions to other popular methods for ATAC-seq. We chose MACS2(10) and F-Seq(11), which
had previously been shown to be the most accurate peak-callers in identifying open chromatin
regions from DNase-seq(38). MACS2, originally designed for ChIP-seq, utilizes a local Poison
model wherein enrichment is calculated relative to a local Poisson model. F-Seq invokes a
Gaussian kernel-smoothing algorithm and then calculates enrichment based on the resulting
Gaussian distribution. Although none of them utilize the intrinsic and unique features in ATAC-
seq data we described before, MACS2 has been used to analyze ATAC-seq data in many
published works(7,20,39-43), and MACS2 and F-Seq is part of the ENCODE analysis pipeline for
ATAC-seq   data   (https://github.com/kundajelab/atac_dnase_pipelines).   We   tested   the

performance of the four algorithms using the two ATAC-seq datasets in GM12878 cell line(6) as

the previous sections.

A major limitation in comparing the performance of identifying open chromatin regions is the

absence of a valid "gold standard" (3). To overcome this problem, we chose to compare the

performance of HMMRATAC and the other algorithms to three distinct independent datasets as

the proxies of true and false set: 1) the active regions and heterochromatin from chromatin states

analysis combining multiple independent histone features (27), 2) DNase-seq (4) and 3) FAIRE-

seq (5) accessible regions of the same GM12878 cell line, originally called from traditional

methods such as Hotspot (31) and F-Seq.

Enrichment in chromatin states of active regions

The first proxy of the true set that we compared the algorithms to is referred to as "active

regions." These sites were defined through an integrative chromatin state segmentation using

chromHMM(27,28) algorithm conducted by the ENCODE project. 8 histone modifications

(H3K27me3, H3K36me3, H4K20me1, H3K4me1, H3K4me2, H3K4me3, H3K27ac, and H3K9ac),

1 transcription factor (CTCF) ChIP-seq and 1 whole genome input datasets in the GM12878 cell

line were integrated through an unsupervised machine learning approach and each genomic

location was annotated as one of 15 mutually-exclusive states. Two resulting states, "Active

Promoters" and "Strong Enhancers", were merged together to create our list of "active regions".

Additionally, the state annotated as "Heterochromatin" was used as a false set. We tested

different cutoff values for each algorithm (see **Methods**) and found that HMMRATAC

outperformed the other algorithms, in terms of precision, recall, and false positive rate in

identifying these "active regions" while avoiding "heterochromatin" (**Figure 4** top row). The area

under the curve (AUC) was then calculated for the recall vs. false positive rate curves (AUC-

ROC) and for the precision-recall curves (AU-PRC) (**Table 1**), after adding extreme points to the

unreachable ends of the curves. HMMRATAC was proved to have better AUC than the two other

methods. It worth noting that HMMRATAC calls larger peaks than the other two methods due to

its merging of the adjacent nucleosome states to the center state. However, despite the larger

average peak size, HMMRATAC identifies a comparable number of accessible regions in base

pairs, as shown in **Supplemental Figure S6**, at comparable levels of sensitivity for "active

regions". This would also indicate that many peaks called by the other methods are falling

outside of the "gold standard" regions, possibly contributing to their deficits in precision compared

to HMMRATAC. Taken together, these results indicate that HMMRATAC is able to identify active

chromatin regions with a higher recall and precision and lower false positive rate, than MACS2 or

F-Seq.

Consistency with results from DNase-Seq and FAIRE-Seq

We then used the accessible chromatin regions detected by two independent assays DNase-seq and FAIRE-seq in GM12878 cell line as cross-validation of ATAC-seq analysis. We downloaded DNaseI hypersensitive sites (DHSs) (4) and FAIRE-seq (5) accessible regions called by ENCODE in the GM12878 cell line(30), then merged DHSs or FAIRE accessible regions that were within 2kb of each other to define our alternative true sets. We continued to use the heterochromatin states outlined above as our false set, although we eliminated any DHSs or FAIRE regions that overlapped a heterochromatin state region and *vice versa*. We found that HMMRATAC outperformed the other two methods in terms of AU-PRC in recapitulating DHSs (**Supplemental Figure S7, Table 1**). MACS2 performed slightly better in AUC-ROC by 0.001. F-Seq was found to perform the best in terms of AUC-ROC and AU-PRC with the FAIRE-seq data. Because the DNase-seq and FAIRE-seq regions were initially been called from traditional methods such as Hotspot(31) and F-Seq, the evaluations based on them are expected to be more biased to traditional approaches.

Application for human monocytes

Thus far, we have shown the performance of HMMRATAC and other algorithms with data generated in the human GM12878 cell line. In order to determine our method's performance with different data sets and different cell lines, we analyzed ATAC-seq data generated in human monocytes subjected to several chemical treatments and sequenced at different time points(20). In addition to ATAC-seq, Novokovic et al. performed ChIP-seq on the same cells, with the same treatments and time points, for the active histone marks histone H3K27ac, H3K4me1 and H3K4me3, and the repressive histone mark histone H3K9me3. We chose five separate data sets generated by that group: RPMI treatment after 4 and 24 hours, LPS treatment after 6 days and BG treatment after 4 and 24 hours. Using the active histone modification as the "Gold standard" and the repressive histone modification as the "real negatives" (See Method section for more details), we compared the performance of the algorithms in the same way we compared their performance in human data (**Figure 4** the second to the sixth row, **Table 1**). We found that HMMRATAC has superior precision, sensitivity, specificity, AUC-ROC and AU-PRC over both MACS2 and F-Seq. Overall, this data indicates that HMMRATAC's superior performance over the other algorithms is consistent across different data sets and different cell lines.

Summary of method comparisons

The summary is shown in **Table 1**. We used a total of 16 independent measures in two different
cell types and six different conditions to benchmark the performance of the three algorithms,
including 8 AUC-ROC and 8 AU-PRC. We found that HMMRATAC outperformed the other two
methods in 6 of 8 AUC-ROC and 7 of 8 AU-PRC. Furthermore, in all of the 12 evaluations of
which the real positives were compiled by integrating multiple histone modification ChIP-seq
datasets, HMMRATAC outperformed the other methods consistently. Overall, these results
indicate that HMMRATAC is the most accurate and reliable peak-caller for ATAC-seq data
analysis.
598
599   **DISCUSSION**
600
HMMRATAC is designed to integrate the nucleosome-free and nucleosome-enriched signals
derived from a single ATAC-seq dataset in order to identify open chromatin regions. For this
reason, HMMRATAC should not be used on ATAC-seq datasets that have undergone either
physical or computational size selection. For that same reason, single-end sequence libraries
from ATAC-seq cannot be analyzed with HMMRATAC. However, we have shown that size
selection results in a decrease in sensitivity and should not be used as a general practice in
ATAC-seq protocols. Therefore, a reasonable way to evaluate the quality of ATAC-seq data for
HMMRATAC analysis is to check the length distribution of the transposition fragments to ensure
that large fragments are present and relatively abundant.
610
Identifying transcription factor footprints, wherein the DNA protected by a binding protein shows
resistance to nonspecific DNA digestion, is an area of active research. Although footprint
identification may be possible with certain datasets or for specific transcription factors, we believe
that HMMRATAC identified summits, or the position with the most insertion events within the
open region, are more robust to identify potential transcription factor binding sites. In fact, it has
been previously shown that DNase-seq signal intensity at a binding motif is a better predictor of
transcription factor binding than the strength of a footprint[44], and we believe this principle
applies to ATAC-seq as well. However, a major reason for this result from He et al., was that
many footprints were artifacts caused by the enzymes' sequence bias. The Tn5 transposase also
has a sequence bias, which would need to be corrected before an effective footprint analysis
could occur. Several methods exist[45,46] that could correct the sequence bias from an ATAC-
seq library. HMMRATAC could be used downstream of such sequence corrections, to reduce
bias' in peak calling, or upstream of the corrections, to identify the reads within peaks that need to
be corrected for footprint or other downstream analysis.
625

It is possible to extend HMMRATAC to identify differentially accessible regions between two or

more conditions. Most of the approaches for identifying such differences from ATAC-seq data

would suffer from the same problems mentioned before, namely, that these methods only

consider the relative strength of the signal and the differences in signal intensity between

conditions. As we've shown here, the incorporation of the structure of regulatory chromatin into a

model could increase the accuracy and sensitivity of calling accessible regions. We believe our

strategy of "decomposition and integration" can be adopted in a differential accessibility analysis

pipeline, by studying the differential NFRs and nucleosomal signals separately and then

combining together.

ATAC-seq shows numerous advantages over other methods for identifying open chromatin

regions, such as DNase-seq and FAIRE-seq, owing to its low starting material requirement and

simple protocol. For these reasons, ATAC-seq has become one of the standard assays for

locating regions of open chromatin, particularly as biomedical research continues to move toward

translational research and precision medicine. Although the number of published ATAC-seq

datasets increases rapidly, researchers are still using methods initially developed for ChIP-seq to

analyze the data. We present HMMRATAC as a dedicated algorithm for the analysis of ATAC-

seq data. We take advantage of the nature of the ATAC-seq experiment that due to the lack of

size-selection while preparing the DNA library in its protocol, DNA fragments associated with well-

positioned nucleosomes around open chromatin will be sequenced as well. Therefore, as a side

note, HMMRATAC shouldn't be applied to those ATAC-seq data generated with a stringent size-

selection on DNA fragments. Different from current methods where only the read enrichment is

considered, HMMRATAC separates and integrates ATAC-seq data to create a statistical model

that identifies the chromatin structure at accessible and active genomic regions. We have shown

that HMMRATAC outperforms other computational methods in recapitulating open and active

chromatin identified with other assays such as chromatin state analysis integrating multiple

histone mark ChIP-seq, DNase-seq and FAIRE-seq. As HMMRATAC is a cross-platform and

user-friendly algorithm, we envision it becoming the standard for ATAC-seq data analysis

pipeline, replacing current methods designed for ChIP-seq analysis.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The HMMRATAC source code, executable file, quick start guide, and javadocs can be

downloaded from https://github.com/LiuLabUB/HMMRATAC. All peaks/regions called by

HMMRATAC, F-Seq, and MACS2, as well as the various "gold standard" files, can be

downloaded from the following URL: http://biomisc.org/download/HumanData.tar.gz.

SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Supplementary Data are available at NAR online.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

FUNDING

This work was supported by the startup fund for TL from Jacobs School of Medicine and
Biomedical Sciences, University at Buffalo.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

EDT and TL conceived and designed the computational method. EDT developed the software
package, implemented the method and analyzed the data. EDT and TL wrote the paper. All
authors read and approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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protein/DNA interactions. *Nucleic Acids Res*, **46**, e9.

TABLE AND FIGURES LEGENDS

Table 1. The Area Under the Curves (AUCs) of method comparisons of HMMRATAC,
MACS2, and F-Seq.

The AUC calculated from the Receiver Operator Characteristic (ROC) curves and precision-recall
curves (PRCs) in **Figure 4** and **Supplemental Figure S7**. Because we can't reach the extreme
sides of the curves while tuning cutoff values, before we calculated AUC values, we added the
following points to ROC curves– (0, 0) and (1, 1), and to PRCs – (0, 1) and (1, L_{true}/(L_{true} +
L_{false})). The L_{true} is the total length of the real positive set, and the L_{false} is the total length of the
real negative set. The numbers of the best performance are shown in bold.

Figure 1. The HMMRATAC Algorithm.
(A) A schematic to represent the structure of an accessible region. **(B)** The algorithmic
workflow. **(C)** Estimation of fragment length parameters through the Expectation-Maximization
algorithm. Mean and standard deviation parameters per EM iteration for three nucleosomal
distributions are consistent among datasets using 50,000 and 500 cells. The parameters for NFR
signals are fixed during EM training so they were not plotted. Iteration #1 shows the initial
parameters. EM was applied to pooled biological replicates. The parameters per biological
replicate were shown in **Supplemental Figure S3**. **(D)** The transition and emission parameters of
the Hidden Markov Model trained through Baum-Welch algorithm on the 50,000 GM12878 cells
ATAC-seq data.

Figure 2. Chromatin Architecture at HMMRATAC Peaks.
(A) IGV browser snapshot of various signals around a negative locus on chromosome 8 and a
positive locus on chromosome 2. Top four tracks show ATAC-seq signals, after being separated
by size, the fifth track shows CTCF ChIP-seq signal, the sixth through ninth tracks show various
histone modification ChIP-seq signal and the tenth track shows MNase-seq signal. The bottom
panel shows RefSeq genes, HMMRATAC calls and state annotations (called with default settings,
red: *background* state, green: *nucleosome* state, and blue: *center* state), MACS2 and F-Seq
peaks (called with default parameters), the active regions combined from "Active Promoters" and

"Strong Enhancers" states from chromHMM (see **Methods**). **(B)** ChIP-seq of H3K4me1,

H3K4me3, H3K27ac, H3K27me3, H3K9ac, and H3K9me3, DNase-seq and MNase-seq signals

(log2 transformed library size normalized pileup) plotted across all distal (> 10kb from gene

promoters) *center* states. Data were clustered using k-means algorithm into 4 clusters.

Figure 3. Chromatin features of HMMRATAC states.

(A) The overlap between either histone modification ChIP-seq peaks or chromatin states in

GM12878 and three HMMRATAC states – *background*, *nucleosome,* and *center*. Color shows the

percentage of GC, the percentage of total genome length, or the percentage of histone peaks or

chromatin states overlapping with each of HMMRATAC states. Overlaps were calculated in

basepair level. **(B)** Distribution of GM12878 H3K4me1 ChIP-seq signal in 1000bps window

surrounding the summits of F-Seq peaks, MACS2 peaks, or HMMRATAC *center* and *nucleosome*

states. **(C)** Distribution of Phastcons conservation score within vertebrates in 1000bps window

surrounding the summits of F-Seq, MACS2, and HMMRATAC calls.

Figure 4. Comparison of performance between HMMRATAC, MACS2, and F-Seq

Left: Receiver Operator Characteristic (ROC) curves and right: precision-recall curves (PRCs) for

the real positive and real negative pairs of 1. active chromatin states vs. heterochromatin for

GM12878 cells, 2. active histone marks (either H3K4me1, H3K4me3 or H3K27ac) vs.

heterochromatin (H3K9me3) for human monocytes (see **Methods** for detail).

Table 1

	GM12878 cell line						Human monocytes									
	NA						RPMI day 1		RPMI 4 hours		LPS day 6		BG 4 hours		BG day 1	
	Chromatin states		DNase-seq		FAIRE-seq		Histone mark ChIP-seq: H3K4me1, H3K4me3, H3K27ac & H3K9me3									
	PR	ROC	PR	ROC	PR	ROC	PR	ROC	PR	ROC	PR	ROC	PR	ROC	PR	ROC
MACS2	0.508	0.829	0.54	**0.818**	0.563	0.809	0.402	0.720	0.447	0.721	0.336	0.672	0.438	0.732	0.402	0.730
F-Seq	0.531	0.827	0.572	0.817	**0.597**	**0.818**	0.440	0.728	0.457	0.736	0.326	0.690	0.45	0.749	0.426	0.737
HMMRATAC	**0.631**	**0.854**	**0.611**	0.817	0.577	0.816	**0.580**	**0.772**	**0.614**	**0.792**	**0.427**	**0.715**	**0.602**	**0.794**	**0.545**	**0.763**

Figure 1

A

Background   Flanking Nucleosomes   Center   Flanking Nucleosomes   Background

B

Alignment of
ATAC-Seq read pairs

↓

Data
preprocessing

↓

Training sites
selection

↓

Training set

Insertion length
Analysis (EM)

↓

Signal
Decomposition

↓

Signals of
NFR/mono-/di-/tri-
nucleosome

↓

Model Training
(Baum-Welch)

↓

3 states HMM of
accessible DNA

↓

Genome Annotation
(Viterbi)

↓

Postprocessing

↓

Calls of
Accessible Regions

C

GM12878 50k cells

GM12878 500 cells

Basepair

Mononucleosome
Dinucleosome
Trinucleosome

Iteration of EM

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

D

HMM from ATAC-seq of GM12878 50k cells

Transition   **Emission**

state1
background

state2
nucleosome

state3
center

state1   state2   state3   NFR   1N   2Ns   3Ns

−3   −2   −1   0
log10(probability)

−1   0   1
Column Z−Score of
log10(pileup)

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4