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Data Visualization: Analyzing an Evidentiary Archive
John Kohlepp

This paper summarizes my approach to analyzing the evidentiary archive of Lisa Mendelman’s article “Character Defects: The Racialized Addict and Nella Larsen’s Passing” as part of Dr. Brenda Glascott’s HON 399 class in the Portland State Honors College. My teammates for this project were Joshua Allen, Elizabeth Estrada Torres, and Daman McConnell—I thank each of them for the hard work and insightful analysis they contributed to our collective work.

The 1929 novel Passing by Nella Larsen is a Harlem Renaissance masterpiece touching upon New Negro aspirations and the societal and psychological minefield of managing (and transgressing) racial boundaries as they existed in the early twentieth century United States. Scholar Elizabeth Dean summarizes the novel’s plot succinctly:

Passing is the story of an intense but fraught friendship between two African-American women in 1920s Harlem. The protagonist, Irene Redfield, is a respected member of the elite; Clare Kendry, her childhood friend, seeks to reclaim a black community while still passing as white—including to her own husband. As their relationship falls apart, accusations of infidelity, queer sexual tension, and scenes of racial recognition and misrecognition culminate in Clare’s death (Dean, 97).

Passing—with its Harlem Renaissance connection, powerful social commentary, and intense psychological ambiguity—has long been fertile ground for academic research. The novel provides a framework for a multitude of scholarly interpretations and approaches. One such approach is Modernist Studies, a “study of the arts in their social, political, cultural, and intellectual contexts from the later nineteenth- through the mid-twentieth century (Modernist Studies Association).

Lisa Mendelman’s article “Character Defects: The Radicalized Addict and Nella Larsen’s Passing” published in the journal Modernism/Modernity is an example of the Modernist approach as applied to Larsen’s novel. Mendelman explores how modern concepts of addiction developed at the beginning of the twentieth century in a collision of contemporaneous medical knowledge, pseudoscience, cultural influences, and racism. Mendelman argues that Passing is a prime example of “racialized addiction” (Mendelman, 727). The main body of Mendelman’s article explores racialized addiction in great detail, and an extensive seven-page notes section functions almost as a second scholarly work in its own right, with extended discussions of tangentially-related themes not included in the body of the article.
Mendelman’s notes section contains a high volume of citations utilizing many lenses, including literary analysis, medicine, black studies, sexuality, societal trends, and religion. The challenge in addressing her evidentiary archive became very clear. The struggle was how to handle and analyze an overwhelming source base that includes seven pages of dense notes—fifty-eight notes in all with 146 citations from eighty-five unique sources. This body of data is much more than I can hold in my mind at one time. The sheer volume makes it difficult to extrapolate patterns.

To understand Mendelman’s evidentiary archive, I decided to convert the citations within the notes section into a Google Sheets document. To systematically organize the information contained in each citation, I created a number of columns. These loosely imitate the Modern Language Association’s format for citations, with additional columns added for article placement and my interpretation of work each citation in the article. The column titles were as follows:

1. Author
2. Title
3. Source Publication (if the cited source were an article included in a larger publication)
4. Publisher
5. Year
6. Pages
7. Note Citation (this shows which note in Mendelman’s article the citation originated)
8. Academic Resource (I used this to separate out Primary and Secondary resources)
9. Scholarly Lenses (this column was my personal assessment of the citation’s point of view)
10. Context (my assessment of the work the citation was doing within the article)
11. Article Section (The article had five sections, and this information helped me to see patterns of citation within each section)
12. Article Page

I entered data from the 146 citations included in Mendelman’s article into the corresponding columns. The image below shows a section of entries from the final spreadsheet (the full spreadsheet may be accessed here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1FR05uWnp6Q-9GM252kYA3iO58RlhCSuwnNUOEgUeZM/edit?usp=sharing).
From this data, I was able to extrapolate patterns and trends related to the sources Mendelman cites. However, while the spreadsheet was useful for organizing data, this way of displaying data is not ideal for visualizing the entirety of Mendelman’s evidentiary archive. Since the goal of this project was not only to collect data from the article’s citations, but to examine how sources were used in the article overall and also in individual article sections, I used the data to generate graphs and tables, thereby visualizing the evidentiary archive. Some key findings are outlined below, which correspond with the visual data found in the Appendix.

The first step in my analysis was to determine how many primary and secondary sources that Mendelman relied on. The path from confusion to clarity traveled through an exhaustive evidentiary archive of fifty-eight notes containing 146 citations. I found that Mendelman’s archive is divided into forty-three primary and 103 secondary sources, roughly a ⅓ to ⅔ ratio (see Table 1). Next, I
grouped the sources according to their scholarly lenses. The scholarly lenses in this article are dominated by literary criticism, which as a category makes up 51.4 percent of the total citations, and a fascinating collection of medical articles from the 1920s, comprising 20.5 percent. 9.6 percent of the total citations were direct quotes from Passing, followed by sexuality/queer studies (6.8 percent), Black studies (5.5 percent), dictionary definitions (4.1 percent), and religious studies (1.4 percent). These data are visualized in Table 2.

Following this, I determined how these sources were distributed throughout the articles. I found that there tended to be larger numbers of sources cited at the beginning of most sections. Additionally, there is a big spike in citations at the beginning of “The Racialized Addict” section. This is where Mendleman strongly ties Passing to the project of the article (see Table 3).

Next, I turned my attention the individual sections to examine the balance and types of context for each article section. I define “context” as my assessment of the work each citation does within the article. In the introduction, Mendelmand sets up major elements to be explored in the overall article by including a discussion of New Negro fiction, cultural concepts of addiction, and some queer sexuality to lay in some of the “defective” groundwork (see Table 4). The following section, “Caberet Hounds” offers an in-depth exploration of character defect in New Negro literature by heavily referencing New Negro thought leaders, contemporaneous medical experts, and a problematically-titled novel by white author Carl Van Vechten to discuss the cultural forces at play at the time (see Table 5). The section “Defective Types” gives medical context about addiction and defects by defining terms and exploring medical articles contemporary to Passing on alcoholism, eugenics, and race as well as their messy intersections into culture (see Table 6). “The Racialized Addict” section draws on a wide variety of contemporary scholarly commentary as well as excerpts from Passing to discuss character defects and addiction. As well as discussing defects and character contrasts within the novel, this section uses scholarly commentary to draw comparisons with other works of fiction (see Table 7). Finally, the section “Falling Icons” shifts attention to the novel Infants of Spring and its ties to Passing’s themes by using scholarly analysis of the two novels as well as the cultural aspirations and downfalls of the New Negro movement (see Table 8).

Several of the top five texts that Mendelman cites in this article, listed in Table 9, originated from an edition of Passing published in 2007 and edited by Carla Kaplan. This was a compilation of the original text of Passing with collected scholarly commentary. Mendelman leaned heavily on this resource. The other notable source was a 1915 medical article on addiction.

With the aid of these data visualizations created through the Google Sheets pivot table function, I was able to show patterns related to the use of the evidentiary archive, such as the spike in citations in the “Radicalized Addict”
section of Mendelman’s article. And since my assessments of the work being done by each citation included a large number of data, I am able to organize and group my own analysis of the entire article overall as well as examining each individual article section. The end result is the increased clarity that comes from a data-oriented vantage point. In addition to its value in analyzing the works of other scholars, this method of framing one’s own work has the potential to visualize strong versus weak sections in a paper—a valuable tool in strengthening scholarly work in its development stages.

Applied in a broader way to scholarly works, data tables and data visualizations can be useful for a team of scholars collaborating on a single article. Through the visualization of quantity, source type, and work within the article using its evidentiary archive, scholars can spot weak or underdeveloped areas in a scholarly article. I see this as a tool to develop scholarly work as well as a helpful tool for the peer review process.

Hyperlinks to cited articles may also be added to the data table as an additional column so that team members may have quick access to the complete text of a cited work. Hyperlinks could also be of use for one’s own work: as a concept develops, one may wish to revisit earlier texts cited to review them in respect of a changing thesis or scholarly lens.

In time, I believe an electronic evidentiary archive will be the standard of published scholarly work, making source data more interactive, sortable, and accessible. Perhaps a shift from a printed-paper standard to an online standard will allow scholars and academic publishers to access cited sources more directly as well as extrapolate patterns and meanings, strengths and weaknesses, from the author’s source materials.

Works Cited


Appendix

Table 1.

Evidentiary Archive

- 58 notes, 146 citations, and 85 unique sources
- 43 primary source citations
- 103 secondary source citations

![Distribution of Academic Resource](chart.png)
Table 2.

Distribution of Scholarly Lenses

- Literary criticism: 51.4%
- Medical: 20.3%
- Religion: 12.4%
- Dictionary: 8.6%
- Sexuality/queer studies: 5.5%
- Black studies: 5.5%
- Novel/direct quotes: 5.6%
Table 3.

Citation Count by Page and Article Section

Table 4.

Article Section: Introduction
Table 5.

**Article Section: “Cabaret Hounds and Thirsty Neurotics”: The Characters of New Negro Literature**

- Alcoholism as identity in modernism/literature: 23.0%
- Commentary by New Negro thought leaders: 18.0%
- Forwarding a quote from Van Vechten (Nigger Heaven): 0.0%
- Reviewing Nigger Heaven: 4.0%
- Letter from Laren to Van Vechten (Nigger Heaven): 4.0%
- Defining a term: 3.0%
Table 6.

Article Section: Defective Types

- Addictant by Blacks in fiction: 5.2%
- Addictant by Whites in fiction: 5.1%
- Addiction and the Chinese: 5.4%
- Addiction and Jews: 3.9%
- Addiction and moral health: 3.3%
- Defining a term: 7.1%
- Addiction and heredity: 5.9%
- Race and ancestry: 7.1%
- Addiction and racial profiles: 7.7%
- Addiction treatment, eugenics: not specified: 3.8%
- Early 20th century understanding of medicine: 4.6%
- Woman and alcoholism: 9.7%
- Alcoholism and eugenics: 52.1%
- Alcoholism, gender, class: 5.6%
Table 7.

Article Section: The Racialized Addict, the New Negro, and the Burdens of Racial Representation

Table 8.
Top Five Texts Cited
