

Mapping a Moment

an American Road Trip Following a Monday in May

It all started with a small town in Northeast Ohio called Ashtabula. It was the first day of June and we were sending emails and making phone calls, asking various eateries and performance venues if they planned to go forward with live music in the coming weeks. Only a few months earlier, the virus known as Covid-19 upended any sense of normalcy in our world, and people were figuring ways to adapt. The two of us are working musicians from Cleveland, and like many of our peers, we wondered about the status of upcoming gigs with the initial stages of Ohio's reopening underway. That's when a phone call to a bar in Ashtabula, 65 miles east of Cleveland, sparked within us a certain curiosity.

This was a Monday, exactly one week after 4 police officers murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis. Following a weekend of news flooded with images and stories capturing violent demonstrations, the bar decided to postpone our show scheduled for that coming Saturday. It turns out a local demonstration, planned in Ashtabula on the same evening, led the owner to consider precautions to avoid potential property damage. The perception was that a demonstration held in even a smaller town like Ashtabula had a likelihood of mirroring the images presented throughout national news.

And so began the curiosity. A protest? In Ashtabula, Ohio? We had to know more. Standing beside the shores of Lake Erie, Ashtabula is a historic port town where single lane roads weave alongside grassy yards, green trees, and tiny pockets of industry. The main drag of Ashtabula features a look reminiscent of many of America's smaller towns set at distance from larger thoroughfares: a quarter mile stretch of two-story brick structures consisting mostly of adjoined store fronts topped by 2nd floor residential units. And as we pondered this little town and its upcoming demonstration, we decided to take to the web and poke around a bit. Were there demonstrations happening in other small towns in our state? And if so, where and how many? It was evident that something snapped within the fabric of our country during those last few days in May as cameras captured countless scenes of violence and destruction amid gatherings in some of America's largest cities. While it was apparent a movement was gaining momentum, neither of us would have guessed a public demonstration would turn up in a town like Ashtabula, far removed from any big city. What we found in those first few minutes of browsing the web was story after story after story of towns throughout our state where individuals had gathered to mourn the loss of a man murdered in a cruel and unfathomable way, and to voice a general belief that our country can and should do better.

As our curiosity grew, we felt a desire to grasp a fuller picture of how Americans were reacting in public places to the murder of George Floyd. Some sources reported that demonstrations nationwide were largely matters of violence and fury. Other sources presented similar images of fire and destruction while stating that the vast majority of protests were peaceful, although seldom presenting images resembling peaceful demonstration. As conflicting stories and images of clashing human beings rattled around in our heads, so began a virtual road trip of sorts. What was really happening out there? Who were these individuals voicing their concerns, and where exactly were these gatherings taking place? We had to know, and so we readied ourselves for a long journey across America. Taking to the information super highway, we traveled to the farthest edges of our young country in an effort to log the demonstrations that occurred in the weeks immediately following the murder of George Floyd. This proved to be a daunting task as it became clear Ohio was not an outlier in its wide occurrence of largely peaceful protests. Individuals across America and beyond had found ways to offer comment:

from the small town of Caribou on the northern tip of Maine to street corners and village greens sprinkled across America's heartland; from rural communities in the deep south to bigger cities and their surrounding suburbs in the state of Texas; from both coastlines and throughout every state between; and from Hawaiian beaches to Alaskan communities as far north as Kotzebue, a small city located inside the Arctic Circle.

And as we ventured beside America's shorelines and riverbanks, vast plains and mountain-scapes, country roads and freeways, we gained a greater understanding of the multitude of ways demonstrations had found their way into public places. In many communities, it began with high schoolers leading the charge, contacting local authorities about arranging a time and place to exercise their First Amendment rights. In other locales, houses of worship called on members of their community to come together in response through prayer and unity. While many demonstrations were a matter of hand drawn signs and chants, others involved long held moments of silence. In Baton Rouge clergy from multiple churches gathered on the steps of the Louisiana State Capitol to pray for victims of police brutality and racial injustice, first responders, and government leaders alike. In certain coastal and island communities, individuals gathered by way of kayak and surf board for "Paddle Outs": hundreds peacefully offering their support by collaborating afloat atop vast bodies of water. Many demonstrations were organized by activist groups, some that have raised concern over police brutality and racial injustice for years. On the other hand, many of those in attendance at demonstrations had never before taken to public places to speak on such matters. In some towns, individuals showed concern by marching, while others, especially worried about illness, displayed public comment by way of caravanning around community centers in cars. Many gathered in masks, and many did not. Many communities were aware of maintaining social distance, and others gathered in close proximity. In some towns, demonstrating was a family matter where children stood among those in attendance. In others, candle lit vigils happened in town centers and on the lawns of houses of worship. Song, dance, civil discourse, and public address were integral pieces among many of these assemblies. In some locales, demonstrations were organized on college campuses by students, while in others sports teams led the charge. In some cases, residents of retirement communities lined the streets outside of where they live, and suburban communities surrounding many major cities found various ways to exhibit their concern.

In some communities, a single person chose to stand with a sign beside a road to present their message. Some would honk in support, and others voiced opposing beliefs, spoken or shouted through open car windows. Sometimes, what began as a gathering of one or two individuals grew organically into a larger assembly over consecutive days. In certain towns in states such as Nevada, Idaho, Montana, and New Jersey, counter-protests were held parallel to those voicing concern about racism and police brutality. In some cases, local residents gathered holding guns, at times citing their 2nd amendment rights and a duty to protect their community from the possibility of damage; they stood aside as spectators to their fellow townspeople in peaceful demonstration, individuals also exercising their American rights. In some scenarios, two protests occurring side by side, each representing different views on the subject at hand, demonstrated a mutual respect for each side's exercise of their right to speak on what they believe despite holding such different beliefs. Simply put, in communities across America, people were taking to public spaces to have conversations with one another. They spoke at all levels of volume and intensity, engaging in dialogue over matters of racism and police conduct through emotions of passion, confusion, sympathy, certainty, humility, discomfort, disbelief, awkwardness, mourning, rage, hate, love, hope, and empathy, all in a desire to voice their concerns and to present a wide range of ideas and suggestions on how to respond.

And just as demonstrations occurred in all varieties of size and style, so did the reaction and response of police among the numerous communities across America where peaceful demonstrations happened. In many towns police responded dressed in riot gear, while in other communities similar attire was set aside and deemed unnecessary by local authorities. Some officers marched among demonstrators and others stood in lines before them. Some engaged in conversation about solutions and some watched quietly from a distance. Some took a knee and some spoke directly on microphones and bullhorns about strategies for improvement. Some shared conversations with concerned citizens and some received insults. Some lined up side-by-side among concerned citizens; some blocked traffic to accommodate marches; and some helped publicize scheduled demonstrations.

None of this is to say that there weren't instances of the dramatic scenes depicted in various news sources. Some cities and towns certainly endured violent clashes between police and demonstrators and instances of fire, smoke, destruction, theft, and injury. But as our journey across America came to a conclusion, we gained a greater appreciation of the fuller picture of how this country responded in public spaces to the murder of George Floyd as evidenced in our mapping of over 1600 demonstrations throughout 1300 American cities (in addition to demonstrations throughout the international community representing 6 different continents and over 50 countries). We found the vast majority of those who felt a need to speak in public places had done so in a peaceful manner. In some metropolises where violence and property damage occurred, demonstrations were often peaceful among larger crowds that dwindled in number by nightfall, the time when some of those gatherings took a turn. We also saw that the majority of cities that endured scenes of violence and destruction in the first weekend following the murder of George Floyd had demonstrated again the second weekend, this time in relative peace and mourning. Now, two and half months removed from the tragedy that occurred on that Monday in May, the debate rages on as to what should be done to improve the institutions entrusted to serve our communities in the interest of public safety. Regardless of the exact nature of the eventual changes needed from one community to the next in this time of crisis and reflection, what we witnessed in our road-trip across the United States during those weeks struck us as fundamentally American: citizens, having witnessed a tragic violation of the public trust carried out in an unfathomable manner, exercising their right to speak and demand that changes be made to prevent such an episode from ever occurring again, and in some cases, sharing the same town squares as those voicing differing opinions. And as the echos of concerned voices and difficult conversations turned over in our heads, we considered ways to tell others about our journey across America.

What resulted was this: the above written reflection on the actions of Americans in a time of crisis; a five and a half minute video illustrating the above sentiment through song, image, and an animated map displaying the occurrence of demonstrations across America; and a data sheet outlining basic details on many of the public demonstrations that occurred in America and beyond from May 25, 2020 to June 13, 2020 (the data used to create the above mentioned map).

To see the the video, go here: [Mapping a Moment - Video on Youtube](#)

To see the list of data, go here: www.thebakersbasement.com/mapping-a-moment

To see the full video of the murder of George Floyd, go here: [George Floyd Murder - Youtube](#)