

# Editing Momentum: Introduction to the Correspondence of Bernadette Mayer & Clark Coolidge

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“Dear Clark, I find my soul is difficult so I will double space again,” Bernadette Mayer writes to Clark Coolidge in the middle of a stunning November 25, 1974, letter. She is recounting part of a Midwest reading tour, taken with Anne Waldman, in which Mayer and Waldman pitched their joint *Basketball Diaries* project to the editors of *Oui* magazine. The tone is humorous, but it also matches the letter’s candid and torrential recounting of the trip; at the end of the letter, Mayer turns from the typewriter to handwriting to update Coolidge on her current feelings about love and her relationships with their friends, implementing a formal shift to reflect her interiority. She writes, “Now here is the serious story, longhand provokes it,” and concludes a few sentences later, “I just wanna write my ass off with some kind of security + love. I’m not asking you any questions, I’m just writing you a long letter.”

This long letter can be contextualized in what Mayer elsewhere calls “the forsythia-falling-from-branches seventies,”<sup>1</sup> a time of propulsive velocity arising from a confluence of technologies, an emphasis on conversation, and an aesthetics that embraced spontaneity. You might just pitch a basketball story to *Oui*, and you might just interview basketball star Oscar Robinson, and you might just write your friend a long letter about it in which you play with the format in order to catch the momentum of conversation, even if that conversation is also a monologue.

“Momentum” is a word that Coolidge uses in relation to reading and writing in his letters of 1979 and 1980, published in *All This Thinking: The Correspondence of Bernadette Mayer & Clark Coolidge*.<sup>2</sup> On September 12, 1979, Coolidge writes of retyping his “longwork,”<sup>3</sup> “Sometimes the words are only passing familiar and I grab one on the way to momentum,” and then on January 21, 1980, “This gets to be about a kind of momentum of thought you’re dealing with in words.” He is referring to his manuscript writing process, but these reflections are enmeshed with his thinking about epistolary writing as he does it, and just as easily apply to the letters themselves. In Mayer’s 1974 letter quoted above, one can see her own style of momentum. Momentum, the “quantity of motion in a moving body,” is “is equal to the product of the body’s mass and velocity.”<sup>4</sup> Mayer and Coolidge’s letters have mass, both in individual letters and in their long-term accretion. The letters are often long, taking up a lot of space on the page, and they add up to hundreds of pages over the course of years.

In the introduction to *All This Thinking*, we identify five periods for the correspondence in order to explain some of the shifts in momentum in the letters: an introductory period between 1965 and 1972, during which the two begin corresponding as editors but quickly move toward friendship and collaboration; a second period from 1973 to 1975, containing long chatty letters; a sparse third period between 1976 and 1979, when the two writers live in geographical proximity and therefore do much of their collaborative thinking in person; a profuse fourth period between 1979 and 1982, covered in *All This Thinking*; and a tapering-off period from late 1982 to 1987, when the letters focus less on writing and more on personal updates. The beginning of this fifth period is also severely marked by Ted Berrigan's death in New York, where Mayer was living and working (from 1980 to 1984) as the director the Poetry Project. After Mayer's cerebral hemorrhage in 1995, the remaining occasional correspondence dropped off, though they spoke of each other fondly to us throughout this project. Mayer passed away in 2022.

This archive contains, to the best of the correspondents' knowledge and the editors' abilities, all of the letters between Bernadette Mayer and Clark Coolidge from November 1965 to June 1978 and December 1982 to April 1995. The remaining letters, from September 1979 to October 1982, can be found in *All This Thinking: The Correspondence of Bernadette Mayer & Clark Coolidge* (University of New Mexico Press).<sup>5</sup> As you can see, our selection process for *All This Thinking* versus *Eclipse* was thus obviously not about comparing and evaluating the content of individual letters; it was about the deluge, seen from inside individual lines and across years. We wanted to balance comprehensiveness with accessibility, feeling strongly that some nonspecialist audiences might be more likely to encounter the letters in a book, while others might peruse them online. Though there are some disadvantages, publishing the correspondence across formats allows the letters to complement each other while also expanding the way they are present-ed, compensating for some of the limits of both online and codex publication. One great advantage is that here on *Eclipse*, readers can easily see scans of much of the correspondence, whereas in UNMP's beautiful volume readers can encounter the letters framed as literature, which we feel they also are.

By focusing on the fourth period in *All This Thinking*, we wanted to suggest how, in many ways, this short period is the culmination of the correspondence. These letters clearly portray Mayer and Coolidge as writers, intensely grappling with the writing process while they are also composing some of their most influential works. However, as anyone who has experienced or read sustained epistolary correspondence knows, this genre doesn't suggest a neat plot arc. The correspondence contains unique characteristics – for instance, a commentary on the materiality of writing, a sense of being *in medias res*, and an intermingling of gossip and discussions of poetic process – that recur in many of the letters, and which are not replicated to the same degree in each poet's letters with other correspondents. We hope that making these earlier and later letters available on *Eclipse* will allow readers to track both specific moments when *All This Thinking*'s collaborative momentum begins to emerge, like Mayer's visit to Chicago, and also see that collaborative energy sustained throughout the correspondence, despite – and even because of – fluctuations in its velocity.

While *All This Thinking*'s periodization is helpful for contextualizing shifts in momentum across the correspondence, we felt that using it to structure the Eclipse presentation of the letters would detract from said momentum. Thus, here the letters are divided simply into two periods, one preceding the book's contents and one following it. Additionally, we have made slightly different transcription decisions for the two formats. In the book version, we emphasized readability and accessibility, removing typos and minor corrections, unless they were commented upon or seemed playful. For Eclipse, we have included typos and typewriter cross-outs (xxxx) both to allow readers to more easily move between a transcription and an image of an original letter and also to convey the relationship between mistake and momentum; mistakes might sometimes be indicative of typing speed or emotional state. In our transcriptions, occasionally a dropped line in the original letter was not replicable because of line length; in those instances, we've inserted a paragraph break. Coolidge especially also uses a paragraph break in lieu of a dropped line when the paragraph has run to the right margin, and in these instances, we've preserved the paragraph break. Bold brackets mark material or commentary not in the originals. Finally, though we chose not to reproduce images of the postcards, we have transcribed the text of them to show moments where the correspondence eddies in a lighter touch.

Speaking of postcards, while writing this introduction, we re-encountered a postcard Mayer sent to Coolidge in August 1974 of Niagara Falls as a winter scene, featuring "the American and Bridal Veil Falls during the winter spectacle of an ice bridge." For a moment, it's hard to identify the snowy scene as the iconic falls; we might assume we're positioned at the top of the falls until we reorient via some tall buildings in the background. On the back, Mayer's opening sentence reads, "The sky is moving in clumps, the sun shoots horizontally the madness at us," and she uses wordplay to visually heighten the conveyed disorientation, adding "stars" above "sky" and "sunset" alongside "horizontally." In the long process of reading, rereading, transcribing, and editing Mayer and Coolidge's correspondence, we have had many moments of getting knocked down by the letters, moments when the writing has dramatically altered our perspective: a waterfall seen from above and below, a sunset shooting madness. These shifts have not only been about Mayer and Coolidge and their work, but also about how to keep writing, reading, viewing, talking – across distance, across difficulty. We hope you are also immersed, disoriented, and awed.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “Bring It Here,” *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, no. 14 (January 1, 1989): 104. This contextual and periodizing language is vaguely echoed in *Desires* when thinking about place: “You wouldn’t believe how lush it is here, everything grows till it falls...” [*Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (Nightboat Books, 2017), 38–39.]

<sup>2</sup> Ed. Anderson and Tapson, University of New Mexico Press, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> *A Book Beginning What and Ending Away*, written 1973–1981, published 2012 by Fence Books.

<sup>4</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, “momentum (n.),” March 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1118842806>; Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “momentum,” accessed April 8, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/momentum>.

<sup>5</sup> Here we should note that because of word count constraints for the book, we did not include a small number of letters Mayer had written to Coolidge from the desk of the Poetry Project, which were largely logistical. There is also a pause between 1978 and ’79, which occurs while the poets live in physical proximity.