Journal of American Studies, **44** (2010), 4, 709–723
doi:10.1017/S002187581000112X First published online 29 June 2010

"I," "You," "Mine": Subject and Quotation in Eléna Rivera's *Mistakes, Accidents, and a Want of Liberty*

DAVID KENNEDY AND CHRISTINE KENNEDY

In the introduction to *Quid 11: Three U.S. Poets* (November 2002), Keston Sutherland wrote, "One considerable and vital task now facing U.S. poets … might be a confrontation with abstraction *per se*." In the context of political poetry, this speaks to two important questions: first, how the individual is to be portrayed as a political subject by the avant-garde; second, what is the role of form in that portrayal? This essay will explore these questions through a detailed reading of Eléna Rivera's sequence *Mistakes, Accidents, and a Want of Liberty* (Barque Press, 2006). At first sight, *Mistakes* reads as a coded series of meditations in an associative order which give the reader the feeling of being abandoned into the text. However, Googling the opening poem's title, "thinking of my life, I almost forgot my liberty", takes the reader straight to the nineteenth-century autobiography of slavery, escape and freedom *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). This connects Rivera's sequence and the reader with one of the moments when a new type of individual-as-political-subject enters literature. An important part of Frederick Douglass's story involves learning to read and write at a time when slaves were forbidden to do so. In this context, Rivera is opening an argument about how the political subject is constructed and portrayed in language. We will argue, then, that through its intertextual relationship with *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and with other texts such as *King Lear*, Rivera's sequence offers revitalizing strategies not only for portraying the subject but for writing and reading politically. In this way, *Mistakes, Accidents, and a Want of Liberty* suggests ways of thinking, writing and reading outside what one poem calls "The limits … of 'you' as reflection, of 'you' as reaction".

There seems to have been broad agreement in the early years of this century about the challenges facing American poets employing experimental strategies. These challenges involve doubts over how to reconcile what might be termed a return to the "I" with avant-garde poetics and over the extent to which cultural representations are coextensive with politics-as-representation. Dawn-Michelle Baude argues, in a review of an earlier collection by the subject of this article, that Eléna Rivera's poetry to some extent

Department of English, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull HU6 7RX. Email: D.Kennedy@hull.ac.uk

exemplifies the practice of an emerging generation of poets working to transcend "the constraints of … familiar experimental strategies by allowing them to disclose a remarkably raw emotional power."[1] This begs the question of what exactly is being disclosed and what happens after disclosure. In the afterword to his 2009 collection *Disaster Suites*, the American poet Rob Halpern argues that "disaster is what we hold in common as a community," and speculates whether this means that the lyric "I" is now actually

> an example of what Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers call a "dissipative structure", that is, a form of provisional and unstable order that emerges as an effect of ever-increasing disorder and dislocation. In the context of our own catastrophe, there are many such structures – NGOs, drug cartels, suicide bombers, al-Qaeda itself, or even the modest Guatemalan evangelical churches in San Francisco's Mission district – faulty bulwarks against the systematic fallout of the system that produced them. Is it useful to think of the lyric "I" in similar terms?[2]

This uncomfortable proposition converges with a similar set of reflections on the relationship between American poetry and American power by the British poet and critic Keston Sutherland:

> as the imperial power of a nation and the real extension of its violent imperium increase, so also do the powers of abstraction in the national language to which the national poetry can be raised. A national language like "American English" which is cross-enlivened and multiplied by other languages present within the same society is not any less singular or monumental on that account; rather, multiplicity becomes itself a singular predicate and monument-aspect of the national language, in line with U.S. ideology as a whole. Can the same thing remain true of poetry's differences also: is poetry in this way bound to duplicate itself as a monument and paean to the political economy in which its owners are sustained? One considerable and vital task now facing U.S. poets … might be a confrontation with abstraction per se …[3]

Lyric and abstraction could be described as opposite and sometimes antagonistic positions in contemporary poetry. But if both are bound to duplicate dominant concerns and tendencies within the national language, then this undermines poetry's claims to be an ethical space where alternatives and possibilities can be offered. Crucially, if poetry is coextensive with political economy then the apparent self-description of the lyric "I" may in fact be reproducing others' descriptions of the self.

[1] Dawn-Michelle Baude, untitled review, Eléna Rivera, *Unknowne Land*, *Chicago Review*, 49, 1 (2003), 122–26, 122. Further references given after quotations in the text.

[2] Rob Halpern, "Post-Disaster," in *idem*, *Disaster Suites* (Long Beach: Palm Press, 2009), 82–83.

[3] Keston Sutherland, "Eleven Edit," *Quid 11: Three U.S. Poets: Laura Elrick, Heather Fuller, Carol Mirakove* (November 2002), 1.

In one sense, then, the emergent generation of American avant-garde poets are negotiating a very old problem which Piers Hugill recently noted in the work of Neruda and Brecht: how to retain

> a concern for innovation and spontaneity in language, but one that attempts to ground the poem more in socio-historical reality, in the realities of economic production and social relations, and most importantly, in the struggle between conflicted means of representation, and contradictory ideologies.[4]

But in another sense, the emergent generation is negotiating a specifically contemporary scepticism about what politics represents. This is because the early twenty-first century has seen politics embodied almost exclusively as "power's response to threat." The implications for the individual subject can be understood by reading two extremes – Althusserian interpellation and Rortyan consensus – in the context of Halpern and Sutherland. Halpern's suggestion of a post-disaster subject means that the individual is interpellated as a survivor, but, because a survivor, as someone whose foundations are always potentially in crisis. And the fact that we are post-disaster is the excuse for the renewed force of the imperium.

In contrast, if Rorty is right that truth derives only from mainstream consensus belief then the state of living post-disaster changes that consensus. Crucially, it changes irrevocably what Rorty terms the "social hope" that "lies in the imagination – in people describing a future in terms which the past did not use."[5] The second part of that sentence is still possible but it is no longer hope that the imagination produces. In what follows, we want to argue that a recent sequence by Eléna Rivera, *Mistakes, Accidents, and a Want of Liberty*, suggests that describing what it feels like to live like this is a way back to self-description. For those unfamiliar with Eléna Rivera and her work, she was born in Mexico City and brought up in Paris, and moved to New York City with her parents as a teenager. She is the recipient of the Frances Jaffer Book Award (1999) and of a Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative Writing (1995). As well as the sequence under discussion, she has published three collections: *Wale; or, the Corse* (1995); *Unknowne Land* (2000); and *Suggestions at Every Turn* (2005).

Self-description is crucial to *Mistakes, Accidents, and a Want of Liberty* because its first words are supplied – or, more correctly, spoken – by Frederick Douglass: "thinking of my life, I almost forgot my liberty."[6] The words are

[4] Piers Hugill, "Poetry and Class Politics," *Quid 19: Poetry and Class Politics* (2009), 38–45, 43.
[5] Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, Volume II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 186.
[6] Eléna Rivera, *Mistakes, Accidents, and a Want of Liberty* (London: Barque Press, 2006), 5. Further references given after quotations in the text.

taken from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, first published in 1845, and come towards the end of it, in chapter 10. After a spell in jail for planning an unsuccessful escape, Douglass was sent by his master, Captain Auld, to Auld's brother Hugh in Baltimore. Hugh Auld hired Douglass out to "Mr. William Gardner, an extensive ship-builder, on Fell's Point. I was put there to learn how to calk."[7] After being injured in an attack by white apprentices, Douglass was sent to calk in Hugh Auld's own yard. His "condition was now much more comfortable," with the result that "those old notions about freedom would steal over me again." This was in marked contrast to working for Mr. Gardner: "When in Mr. Gardner's employment, I was kept in such a perpetual whirl of excitement, I could think of nothing, scarcely, but my life; and in thinking of my life, I almost forgot my liberty" (65). It is important to understand the full force of "excitement"; that is, a state of abnormal stimulation. What Douglass is describing here is a condition of having to guard one's life but somehow continue to live in hope, to continue to feel hope. This tells us much about why Douglass's *Narrative* had such an impact on its first publication and why it continues to resonate. Douglass makes one of the first portrayals of a new type of political subject: the self not as a final destination but as a self-in-progress. Douglass portrays the self as a political self-in-the-making that understands the circumstances of and reasons for this being-in-making. He also portrays the self as living with and living through the difficulty of experiencing the self in this way. And, as Howard McGary has pointed out, this means that the nation that contains such a self "should be treated as an ideal in progress that can help us transform the present to a morally preferable future."[8] This was Douglass's astonishing achievement. A nation that is an "ideal in progress" cannot afford to regard truth as contingent on shared habits and practices. Douglass's account of slavery records the lived consequences of subjugation and how such subjugation not only relies on a distortion of consensus but, through its actions, continues to produce that distortion.

So what does it mean to put Douglass's words at the beginning of a sequence of poems published over 160 years later? First, it portrays the political subject as under constant threat and the idea of liberty as being in constant flight. Douglass's words put survival before freedom and this

[7] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1997), 61. Further references given after quotations in the text.

[8] Howard McGary, "Achieving Democratic Equality: Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Reparations," *Journal of Ethics*, 7 (2003), 93–113, 94.

produces a particular reader-as-political-subject. Does the reader recognize the quotation? Does it seem to them an accurate description of present conditions? Second, it indicates that the poems are refracted through at least one other speaking voice. Third, to borrow Elizabeth Willis's observation about an earlier Rivera chapbook, *Unknowne Land*, the use of Douglass "reiterates poetry's ongoing role as an extreme discourse of beginnings and apocalypses, strophes and catastrophes."[9] Douglass's words serve to figure poetry as a radical rupture in the reader's experience of language, pulling them suddenly into someone else's world view. (Indeed, as a brief aside, one suspects that fear of such a rupture is what prompts many mainstream poets to preface readings of their work with introductions that often render the reading of an individual poem superfluous.) Such radical rupture also derives from the fact that the presence of Douglass *in his extremity* serves as a reminder that the interdependent systems of economics, culture, politics and society are actions worked on living bodies. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the use of words from a turning point in Douglass's narrative has the effect of identifying American lyric poetry with national language and with the rhetorics of nation as ideal and perfectible form.

However, we are getting a little ahead of the actual experience of beginning to read *Mistakes, Accidents, and a Want of Liberty*. What do we do if we cannot immediately identify the quotation from Douglass? We can Google it and rapidly identify it. This would not have been possible twenty years ago and the ability to do so now also produces a particular type of reader-as-political-subject. The reader is certainly more expert than they were several minutes ago and has bought into the illusion that what might be termed prosthetic expertise is knowledge and empowerment. The reader has also experienced themselves as susceptible to perpetual bombardment. Crucially, the reader has entered and participated in what must be described as a contingent space par excellence. Immediately, then, there is some discomfort between a text – Douglass's – which clearly believes that there are foundations that justify our values and beliefs, and a context that might be described as, to borrow a phrase from Douglass, "a perpetual whirl of excitement." To put this another way, there is a lack of fit between a text which figures a belief in a preferable future and a context in which our primary behaviour, surfing, seems to converge with Hélène Cixous's description of Freud's essay on the uncanny as a "search whose movement

[9] Review of *Unknowne Land* (Kelsey Street Press, 2000), *Poetry Project Newsletter* (January 2001). Quoted on Barque Press website at http://www.barquepress.com/mistakes.html. Accessed 21 April 2009.

constitutes the labyrinth which instigates it."[10] This means that Rivera's use of Douglass has two other important effects: it connects Rivera's sequence and the reader with one of the moments when a new type of individual-as-political-subject enters literature, and it does so by recognizing the broader textual environment of the contemporary reader and their behaviour within it. An important part of Frederick Douglass's story involves learning to read and write at a time when slaves were forbidden to do so. Likewise, we have to learn how to read *Mistakes, Accidents, and a Want of Liberty*. In this context, Rivera is opening an argument about how the political subject is constructed and portrayed in language.

Douglass's account makes clear that there are different ways to resist others' descriptions of us and with very different consequences. First, Douglass tells us that the home plantation of Colonel Lloyd "was called by the slaves the *Great House Farm*" (original emphasis) and was regarded as a better place to work than the out-farms:

> Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm … They would then sing most exultingly the following words: – "I am going away to the Great House Farm! O, yea! O, yea! O!" This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves … To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery … I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. (18–19)

Second, Douglass tells us that Colonel Lloyd "owned so many [slaves] that he did not know them when he saw them; nor did all the slaves of the out-farms know him" (21). Out riding one day, Lloyd met a slave he did not recognize and who did not recognize him. Lloyd's enquiries about the slave's master and his lot provoked negative answers. On later finding out that he owned the ungrateful slave, Colonel Lloyd sold him to a Georgia trader:

> He was immediately chained and handcuffed; and thus, without a moment's warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered, from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death. This is the penalty of telling the truth, of telling the simple truth, in answer to a series of plain questions.
>
> It is partly in consequence of such facts, that slaves, when inquired of as to their condition and the character of their masters, almost universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind. (21–22)

[10] "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'Uncanny')," *New Literary History*, 7, 3 (1976), 525–48, 525.

The whole idea of consensus and of shared habits starts to seem unrealistic when the individual is himself an object of unrestrained trade. But what is interesting here is what Douglass goes on to say. Slaves, he says, "suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it, and in doing so prove themselves a part of the human family." Slaves "are like other people, and imbibe prejudices quite common to others" (22). Douglass goes on to say that, when asked, he always said he had a kind master, and in saying so never once considered himself "as uttering what was absolutely false" because he always "measured the kindness of my master by the standard of kindness set up among slaveholders around us" (22). What this seems to be saying is that one thing that makes us human is our ability to know the truth but ignore it and our consequent willingness to subscribe to prejudice and bias.

It could be argued that Rivera's use of Douglass is not unique, beyond its particulars, and that *Mistakes* is embedded in a large tradition of American poetry that engages the canonical historical with a fragmented aesthetic. The work of Susan Howe would be an obvious example and, indeed, *Mistakes* owes a clear debt to Howe's practice in collections like *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978) and *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987). Like Howe, Rivera combines evocative lyric fragments with what Peter Middleton identifies in Howe's work as "phrasal units which fall short, but not by much, of being sentences or propositions."[11] Middleton's description of Howe's take on the experimental is equally applicable to Rivera's work: "an exploration of what is never clearly text and never clearly other, only a history of boundaries, captures, escapes, genocides and glimpses of something 'seen once'" (93).

Middleton's discussion also shows how Rivera diverges from the tradition Howe's work represents. A myth of beginning recurs in Howe's work that combines "American settlement, paradise, golden age, creation, childhood" and various poetic figures (92). Rivera's use of Douglass also derives from a concern with origin – the origin of the modern political subject – but this is refracted through her generational context. Dawn-Michelle Baude reads Rivera's allusiveness as an example of "the influence of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* – a book whose impact on a generation of emerging poets has yet to be fully measured." Cha's impact derives from her portrayal of "the writer's struggle with the relationship between censored personal

[11] Peter Middleton, "Julia Kristeva, Susan Howe and Avant-Garde Poetics," in Antony Easthope and John O. Thompson, eds., *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 81–95, 91. Further references after quotations in the text.

expression and censured identity" (125). The censored and the censured have particular meanings post-9/11 and Rivera's sequence partly registers what happens when the political subject-in-process exemplified by Douglass encounters them. Middleton's account of Howe's myth also suggests how her work draws much of its energy and impact from palimpsestic practices. As our discussion of *Mistakes* will make clear, Rivera's poems are often palimpsests of each other. The sequence can also be said to overwrite its opening quotation from Douglass. This has the effect of suggesting that the modern political subject is also a palimpsest, overwritten by everything that has occurred between Douglass's *Narrative* and now. And it could be argued that each individual's experiences of that subjecthood contribute to that overwriting.

To return to *Mistakes, Accidents, and a Want of Liberty*, a representational mode that, in Douglass's words, is apparently "unmeaning" but actually "full of meaning" seems highly pertinent to Rivera's conception of lyric. Indeed, in many ways *Mistakes* seems to continue the procedure that Dawn-Michelle Baude identified in *Unknowne Land*: "Hints and insinuations threaten disclosure but do not accomplish it … Consequently, the reader is left in a curious voyeuristic position of reading without really understanding" (124). *Mistakes* comprises thirteen poems. As we have already noted, the first poem starts out with a quote from Douglass and all the others are titled from the last line of the preceding one, not necessarily exactly, which allows for a sense of formal patterning. The titles of the individual poems seem to operate as a focus for meditation or as objects of meditation. The subjects they allude to are explored within the context of the project as a whole but in a more or less free way. The poems form a chain, or maybe a rosary, although, at first sight, they do not appear as such. Some formal patterning can also be detected in the way the forms of individual poems can be said to harmonize with each other. For example, the first three poems – "thinking of my life, I almost forgot my liberty", "I almost forgot" and "The most unhappy" – have, respectively, four quatrains, one eight-line stanza, and three eight-line stanzas.

Just as one poem seems to generate the next, so vocabulary is recycled and recontextualized throughout the sequence. For example, "the quality of the mechanism" that appears in the second poem "I almost forgot" in the context of "The quality of a question" (6) reappears as "the question about the mechanism" in the final poem "The alphabet" (17). In this sense, the very last line of the sequence, "Interwoven reflections of sounds" (17), seems to tell us a lot about how it is structured. This has two effects. First, it means that in reading we are directed backwards and forwards both in

individual poems and in the sequence. This, we might say, is the sequence's disorienting necessity. Second, this means that Rivera uses words so that they echo through different contexts for the reader: the banal everyday, economics, politics and philosophy, and the poetic associations of the educated reader. In this context, it is also worth noting the relative absence in the sequence of what we might call a chronotopic foundation. We are never certain where and when we are, what the situation of the sequence is. The deictic markers and antitheses that we would expect to find in lyric poetry – "here/there," "now/then," even "this/that" – are almost completely lacking. The opening poem's "a beggar / I move through *this* broken naught" and "forgotten ecstasy in *that* foreign territory" (5 – emphases added) find no answering frame until the closing poem's "My destiny brought me *here*" (17 – emphasis added). In between, we cross and recross an open linguistic space in which the reader often encounters incomplete grammatical structures, as in "Will the image help hold / the style of a certain" (7).

What happens in this space? First, there is a definite sense of all the poems making a discussion of language and speech and of how language and speech are stifled or repressed through the social context speakers find themselves in. So in the opening poem, its speaker says, "Perhaps I swallow to survive the ripe / reasons shortening my threadbare existence" (5), while "The most unhappy" registers "Reluctance at first to / speak devastation" (7). Second, it is possible to discern chains of imagery involving ingestion, consumption and the oral; the visual and its relation to the verbal; and clothing. Identifying such chains reproduces an important aspect of the experience of reading *Mistakes*. In this sense, *Mistakes* continues what Dawn-Michelle Baude identified as the "operative strategy" of *Unknowne Land*: "repetition of specific words, their substitution and variation, deferral and displacement" (125). The rest of our discussion will focus on two individual poems in order to demonstrate the sequence's particular strategy of what might be called elusive allusion.

The first poem we will look at is "Green," which we quote in its entirety:

> The relation between a buyer and his money –
> A manifestation of "I" and "Mine"
> ingested. The evidence of what was used up.
> (Hesitant at first then filled with aphorisms.)
> An assertion of the mark absorbed into the silhouette
> so that the "real" (we are convinced) was squandered
> (something for which we trade our lives). (8)

The title of the poem uses a word from the last line of the previous one – "violent green space" (7). The first line would seem to confirm that "green" refers to money and, in a sequence that is concerned with economics and the actions of capital, it is worth noting that it appears only once. Other colours – blue, various shades of red – appear throughout. However, we should also note that "green" is a word with a huge range of adjectival and nominal meanings, everything from "vigorous," "envious" and "naive" to vegetables and grass, and that Rivera tends to use words in a way that invokes their meanings in different contexts and discourses. "Green" exemplifies the way that *Mistakes* veers between clarity and opacity. The opening two lines propose an interdependent relationship between economic activity, consumption and identity. "The evidence of what was used up" floats free of this meaning. It could refer back to "relation" or to "manifestation" or it could mean that what results from a transaction is "evidence" of the "relation" and the "manifestation." Of course, there is the added complication that "a buyer and his money" also evokes "a fool and his money."

The first bracketed phrase also raises a number of questions. Who or what is (or was?) "hesitant"? Does "filled" imply that something was first empty? Is that emptiness the result of "what was used up"? And, if there is an argument about identity here, do the lines imply that identity is dependent on that "using up" or is the surplus of it? The use of parentheses brings its own challenges. Rivera employs them in three other poems in the sequence and, as David Wills has argued in another context, parentheses reveal "the overwhelmingly complicated economy of what and who is inside and outside of what text."[12] A phrase in parenthesis can suggest an aside, a commentary, and, if we are used to reading translated texts, a relation between translation and original. Wills also suggests that a phrase in parenthesis can be likened to a prosthesis: "A parenthesis, like an apostrophe, attaches itself to the body. In punctuating the text, it also particularizes a certain addressee (for example the one who is interested enough to pay attention to the detail within it)" (296). So the status of the bracketed phrase is uncertain: within the hierarchy of the poem it would seem to be have a secondary status but if it is an aside then it has the effect, as Wills notes in a discussion of asides, of contravening the structural division between actor and audience and giving "the audience the status of fellow actors" (292).

[12] David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 296. Further references given after quotations in the text.

The other notable feature of the poem is the use of double quotation marks around "I," "Mine" and "the real." This is a feature of the whole sequence and appears in ten of its thirteen poems. In the context of the quotation from Douglass's narrative that begins the sequence, their use with the pronouns here suggests that "I" and "Mine" are quotations from someone else's story; and the use of double, as opposed to single, marks suggests quoted speech. This, in its turn, suggests that if identity and consumption are interdependent then what we do in economic activity is to consume someone else's idea of ourselves. "I" as a quotation or as quoted speech is not the same as "I" as a subject. And we should not forget that "quote" and "quotation" have particular economic meanings. The use of double quotation marks around "the real" invokes both semiotics and Lacanian ideas of subjectivity. So, in this sense, the poem might be asking us to consider that it is not possible to separate, say, economics and semiotics from each other. The poem might be asking us to think about how and when "I" is a subject. This connects with what the next poem in the sequence, "Our lives," suggests is a "subservient patchwork structure / I, you, we, us / crushed alive" (9). What this suggests is what might be termed a distributed subjecthood, something that "Green" seems to mime in its movement from "his," through "I" and "Mine," to "we" and "our."

Conventional close reading, then, will only get us so far – which may, of course, be part of the point. To understand what subjectivity is and how it is made, we may need a different way of reading it. "Err," the penultimate poem of the sequence, is another complex play of quotations and echoes in which economics and subjectivity seem to be to the fore; and, again, we quote it in its entirety:

> We are spent, mistake me not. We restless and ruled
> beggars, a good dog, "till I became my own master."
> Rulers of nothing, it turned out (heard that tune
> More than I'd care to). Commend me to my inheritors.
> A rude way. Winter reckons with politics and ensures
> dimes, quarters, and bills – buy up my merchant's woe.
> The buyer chooses his suit like a song, pinstriped
> tales shall get, whereas solids shall lose, unless mended.
> The difference between blues, "a slave in fact" and
> "a slave in form", and a thrifty command will tax you.
> A woman sits, folds her arms and whispers so that
> everyone can hear, "All I know is the alphabet!" (16)

The title is the last word of the previous poem, "Shameless" (15), and is, again, open to wide interpretation. "Shameless" has the most fragmented

form of all the poems in *Mistakes* which can be read either as steps or as columns. The poem opens,

plastic & silver walls
manufactured
for our use

facts
on loan
Ruled

The poem is the most extreme example of the incomplete grammatical structures we identified earlier. The effect of this is to derive "Err" as a title from a context that makes little sense: "brazen / into someone else's / err." "Err" could be read as a verb, as "error" interrupted, or even as a sound of hesitancy. There is even a distant possibility that in the context of the poem "Err" it mimics the sound of a dog's growl. At any rate, it is not surprising that a poem whose title suggests a state of error and/or hesitancy should begin "We are spent, mistake me not" in the language of exhaustion and waste that is found elsewhere in the sequence.

One of the most interesting aspects of "Err" is that Rivera once again quotes directly from Frederick Douglass. The quotation in line two comes from chapter 10 of his *Narrative*, after he has left service with the negro-breaker Edward Covey:

> The year passed off smoothly. It seemed only about half as long as the year which preceded it. I went through it without receiving a single blow. I will give Mr. Freeland the credit of being the best master I ever had, *till I became my own master*. (56, original emphasis)

Rivera's use of the quote seems to draw some of the force supplied by Douglass's use of italics. The quotations in lines nine and ten actually precede this passage in the *Narrative* and come after an important turning point, Douglass's victory in his fight with Covey to resist being whipped for no reason:

> I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. (50)

Rivera reverses the order of the two key phrases and, again, her use of them seems to dilute the force of the Douglass passage. "The difference between blues" suggests that there may not be much difference between two fairly similar states of despondency. Indeed, one of the most challenging aspects of Douglass's *Narrative* is its representation of self-consciousness as something

that initially produces profound despair. At the same time, the difference between "form" and "fact," between categorization and self-description, is at the heart of the sequence's concerns. One question that it raises cumulatively might be the extent to which subjecthood is less or more than the constantly shifting relation between form and fact.

The ending of "Err," although not a quote from Douglass, reminds us that learning to read and write is an important step on the road to self-consciousness. In the context of Douglass's *Narrative*, it also presents us with an individual who does not yet feel, in his words, that

> learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. (33)

"Opened my eyes," "the horrible pit," and "no ladder upon which to get out" are quoted earlier in the sequence in "Subject." Reading and writing, then, are clearly important to the sequence, but this also suggests that something the sequence wants to create for the reader through its complex allusions, internal echoes and quotation is a felt sense both of coming to self-consciousness as a moment of despair and of what Douglass calls "my condition … pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate" (33). One effect of the way that the sequence demands to be read backwards and forwards both within individual poems and as a whole is to re-create something else that Douglass describes: the impossibility, once self-consciousness is achieved, of "[getting] rid of thinking … of this everlasting thinking of my condition" (33).

Rivera's use of Douglass is, then, a way of exploring what a fully self-conscious American political subjecthood might start to feel like. To return to the language of the passage from Rob Halpern with which we began, such subjecthood would necessarily feel like a "dislocation" produced by that self-consciousness in the established order. But in contrast to Halpern, Rivera's short sequence suggests that full self-consciousness is not a product of the order's failure but a recognition of it. It is to be, in Douglass's words, "no longer content" with one's condition (56). This, in its turn, suggests that the lyric "I," if it is to have any value, must be reimagined as an expression of full self-consciousness and not as the means of reproducing what Dawn-Michelle Baude calls "the pallid autobiographical occupations sanctioned by the mainstream" (122). Allusion may be a part of that self-consciousness and this may partly explain why there is a sense in *Mistakes* similar to that which Baude identifies in *Unknowne Land*. Both sequences share an "allusive momentum" that, Baude argues, sometimes threatens to overwhelm the

poetry so that "the allusions possibly rupture, rather than integrate into, the text" (125).

Such a lyric would involve a sense of exposure and this is underlined by the sequence's more distant but nonetheless crucial intertextual relationship with Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The most overt allusion is a snatch of quotation in "The most unhappy": "Peacetime arguing cold / in rain about the leash. / *Blow winds and crack* / the dog that man tied not" (7, emphasis added). Our point here is not a trivial argument that the play's many references to dogs and beggars, and on at least one occasion to slaves, underwrite similar references in *Mistakes*. What Rivera's sequence shares with Shakespeare's play is a concern with the relation between garments and identity. There is a set of allusive variations being worked throughout the sequence: "threadbare existence" (5); "robes of sound" (6); the fashion connotations of "silhouette" (8); "patchwork" (9); "pliable robes" (11); "the robes of the subordinate" (12); "The buyer chooses his suit like a song, pinstriped / tales shall get" (16); and "scarves," "scarf" and "mantle" (17). It is instructive to compare all this with part of one of Lear's so-called "mad" speeches in Act IV, scene vi:

> Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;
> Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
> And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
> Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.

The images here are part of wider themes within the play: a contrast between civilized selves and essential selves; and the perversion of justice by wealth. But the play also suggests a relation between clothes and the extent to which the self is autonomous, self-aware and coherent. Without wishing to make too much of this, it is worth noting the close proximity in Douglass's *Narrative* of being fully cleaned and clothed for the first time, leaving for Baltimore, and learning ABC (26–29). And this, in turn, can be connected with a comment in the eighth poem of *Mistakes*, "A strange country": "Embedded in the process / of covering and wrapping is a manifestation / of the whole" (12). Typically, of course, the poem leaves open whether "the whole" is the structure of which "the process" is a part or whether it is "being whole." Returning to *King Lear*, there is also a sense in which *Mistakes* can be said to function like the "mad" speeches. Like Lear's speeches, individual poems and the sequence as a whole rely on undertones of meaning which ask the reader to read for what are in effect subconscious connections.

"A strange country" ends "The mouth / opens wide for an answer then closes again in / expectation of a different question" (12). There is, then, an

utterance which is not produced. The mouth is an in and an out: it produces language but it consumes as well and is, in an important sense, where the self is literally embodied. We began by connecting Eléna Rivera's poetry with wider discussions about lyric and abstraction in contemporary American innovative poetry. *Mistakes* does much more than reproduce well-established, post-structuralist-inflected challenges to the idea of the lyric self as a unified self. The sequence explores how the body is a social locale and a real, individual and metaphorical place. As we hope to have shown, the language of the individual poems invites the reader to ask what has been done to the self and the body that so complicates and compromises poetic utterance. And this underlines why Douglass's *Narrative* is so important. Douglass tells us how his painful coming to full self-consciousness involved a movement from a "want of utterance" to having the means to understand that he was suffering "unutterable anguish" (33). *Mistakes* reminds us that Douglass is one point of origin for the modern American self as a self-in-process, and, by doing so, throws into question the authentic, unified self of lyric poetry. The lyric becomes, instead, a means of exploring what Dawn-Michelle Baude identified in *Unknowne Land* as the "various projections and approximations of self" (126). In the context of Rob Halpern's portrayal of disaster-in-common, Rivera's sequence becomes what might be termed a "test case" that shows how that sense of disaster reveals the "want of utterance" and "want of liberty" that are deeply imbricated in the lyric self. The emotional power of her poetry comes from her unflinching exploration of lyric-as-lack.