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 **On Mysticism, Latinas/os, and the Journey: A Reflection in
Conversation with Mary Engel**

Nancy Pineda-Madrid

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**On Mysticism, Latinas/os, and the Journey:
A Reflection in Conversation with Mary Engel**

Nancy Pineda-Madrid (bio)

Perhaps for many readers, even most, the question of "no-self" and "the

calling" strikes a discordant yet vital cord. Surely, as Susan Ross has argued, "feminist theology's agent-oriented approach could benefit from greater attention to contemplation."¹ Mary Engel wisely focuses our gaze here. With our feminist convictions at the ready, she asks, How might we think seriously about women's spiritual maturation? Even more pointedly, she calls our attention to a defining challenge of the second half of life, one that profoundly vexes our middle-age sensibilities: "Deheroization is the grand failure of a life. Not everyone can fail because it is such hard work, one must first climb painfully up to get to the height to fall from" (151). It is likely that we would rather not ponder Clarice Lispector's agitational aphorism any sooner than necessary. Fortunately, Engel won't let us slip away easily.

While Engel's wise words ought to enjoy wide recognition, they are nonetheless problematic. She writes, "To save your life you must lose it; but one cannot lose what one does not have" (152). Having a life, which one may choose to "lose," necessarily means that one has had opportunities to develop one's gifts, talents and abilities, and opportunities to contribute in the world. By way of contrast, she acknowledges the "involuntary, scripted suffering of women, Jews, and all others as the dominant culture's designated victims," pointing out that women and men are not called "to be passive victims" and are not called to "resign themselves to an undervalued life" (152). True enough. But while many of the "dominant culture's designated victims" clearly recognize and ardently embrace the universal spiritual calling to "become fully human," they do so notwithstanding a dominant culture bent on curing them of the "sin of being." The quest to cure these recalcitrant "others" of the "sin of being" takes on greater intensity when "being other" concerns not only gender but also race, ethnicity, class, culture, sexual orientation, and the like. This is no minor point. The world is full of "others" who through no failing of their own bear a much more significant burden that daily undermines their efforts to become fully human. The dominant culture by design regularly inflicts wounds upon these "others," reminding them that they are, to use the title of a once popular play, "children of a lesser god."² While the calling may be "given to anyone," and

while it is, no doubt, always difficult to "be successful at failure," for many, it is not only difficult but fraught with intractable complexity. **[End Page 178]**

What I am suggesting here is that while one's willingness to embrace the "no-self" marks a decisive moment along the journey of spiritual maturation, the path toward this moment needs to be imagined in diverse ways, particularly in light of the many who know a world set on curing them of the "sin of being." We need many paths to the "no-self." For paths to spiritual maturity must entail more than "public, noisy work" and more than "work that is hidden" (159). In light of *lo cotidiano* (everyday life and experience³) of the "others," what might be some different paths to spiritual maturity?

Some new paths may be found if we explore the lives of women mystics with care, attempting to discern how they each negotiated the perilous terrain between their calling to the no-self and the many ways their life journeys were marked by a patriarchal or, better said, *kyriarchal* world determined to cure them of the "sin of being."⁴ Their life journeys could teach us much about the diversity of paths to spiritual maturity.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695) offers us an interesting and informative example. She is known not as a mystic but as a scholarly and literary genius.⁵ However, even though she used her vast intellectual knowledge as the authoritative basis for the theological claims she made, the themes of her scholarly writings reflect her knowledge of mystical...

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¹ Susan A. Ross, "Women, Beauty, and Justice: Moving beyond Von Balthasar," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2005): 79–98, quotation on 79.

² Mark Howard Meckoff, *Children of a Lesser God: A Play in Two Acts* (Clifton, NJ: J. T. White, 1980).



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2715 North Charles Street
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[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



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