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## Reframing Disability through an Ecocritical Perspective in Sara Mesa's *Cara de pan*

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### Abstract

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This article establishes a dialogue between disability studies and ecocriticism to analyze Sara Mesa's novel *Cara de pan* (2018), which narrates the relationship between a thirteen-year-old girl bullied at school and a fifty-four-year-old man with an atypical appearance who fixates on limited topics. The analysis examines the hegemony of normativity and dominant social narratives about disability, gender, and sexuality. Grounded in the idea that people with disabilities actively intervene in their environment, the essay argues that the characters' environmental empathy supports the need for a diversity of experiences and perspectives, positively resituating disability and autism.

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Sara Mesa's *Cara de pan* (2018) focuses on a disabled adult male and an adolescent female's relationship and social ostracism due to their nonnormative physical and social characteristics. Disability, gender, and ecocriticism intersect in the narrative's critical assessment of social othering. This essay starts from a materialist understanding of disability in the context of public spaces, identity and self-realization, gender, and sexuality. Discussion of synergies and tensions in seeking an alliance between ecocritical and disability studies establishes the methodological and theoretical approaches. The study then focuses on how stigmatization socially constructs disability and deviance in Mesa's novel. This includes an analysis of the representation of public anxiety regarding disability, sexuality, and gender. Finally, the essay argues that *Cara de*

*pan*'s proposal of ecological consciousness offers a positive revision of disability that counters stigmatization of nonnormativity.

Born in Madrid in 1976 and resident of Sevilla since childhood, Mesa is a Spanish writer who has received several literary prizes for her novels and short stories.<sup>1</sup> In large part, she employs a minimalist style that reduces the narrator's role, attends to the subtleties of characters' perspectives, and presents ambiguities, silences, and informational gaps to produce a disquieting quality. She frequently portrays social othering, loneliness, violence, power abuse, as well as desire for friendship and love, and her works contend with contemporary issues, such as the real estate bubble and 2008 economic crisis, homelessness, environmental contamination, and an Internet-connected world. Children and adolescents figure prominently in her works, which often explore the possibility to learn about oneself through the perspective of another.<sup>2</sup>

*Cara de pan* is divided into two parts, "El parque" and "La cafetería." In the first, Casi is skipping school, where peers ridicule her. She is self-conscious about her weight, insecure, and confused by her pubescent body. She spends her days in a park in a small, grassy area hidden behind hedges.<sup>3</sup> The narrative begins with Casi leaning against a tree, reading a teenage girls' magazine, when a fifty-four-year-old man walks into her hiding area, surprising her. Displaying nonnormative communication, el Viejo has idiosyncratic intonation and speaks incessantly about two topics: birds and jazz singer-cum-civil rights activist Nina Simone. After some time, unbeknownst to el Viejo, Casi starts writing about herself and el Viejo in a diary, fictionalizing her reality to conform to and test the boundaries of normative stories. She imagines that no one makes fun of her any longer and that el Viejo is a wealthy man with whom she is having an affair. In the much shorter second section, Casi and el Viejo have run into each other on the street many months after they had last met in the park, and go to a cafeteria to talk. The pair converses for more than three hours about the end to their time together, birds, and Nina Simone. The reader learns that Casi's parents and school had discovered her truancy. Her parents also had found her diary and followed her to the park, where they confronted her and escorted her home. The alerted police arrested el Viejo as he entered the empty hiding space, after which he was incarcerated and given a restraining order when released. Casi never admitted to the police, her parents, or the psy-

chologist that she invented the diary's injurious stories. At the cafeteria, she tells el Viejo about the diary, but not her creative elaborations.

### **Disability and Ecocritical Studies: A Cautionary Alliance**

The text's foregrounding of human interactions with the environment and characters' nonnormative attributes suggest the productiveness of using ecocritical and disability studies for an analysis of *Cara de pan*. These two disciplinary areas are emerging in Hispanic studies in contrast to an established critical history in English-language literary and cultural studies.<sup>4</sup> Ecocritics examine representations of the natural world in literary and cultural works in the context of current environmental concerns and employ a variety of approaches, including ethics, feminism, postcolonialism, animal studies, environmental justice, and more (Flys Junquera 308; Westling 6-7). Evolving from a focus on man's experiences in nature and rural settings (the gender specificity is intentional), ecocriticism now considers the multi-faceted impact of humans' assumed hegemony over nature on diverse peoples and environments. Disability studies calls attention to the role of construed conceptions of "normal" in creating what is perceived as disability(ies) and disabled, while not denying the reality of disability (i.e., not fully hearing or difficulty reading social cues). Further, disability studies emphasizes that normalcy is historically situated, revises negative connotations of disability, and questions the bifurcated division of abnormal and normal (Davis, "Introduction"). Synergies between disability studies and ecocriticism provide a means to better comprehend Mesa's narrative, yet caution in assuming their compatibility is warranted due to historical characterizations of people with disabilities as animals or less than fully human.

In *Disability Studies and Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara acknowledge friction between these two fields, for nature writing and environmental movements not only have privileged the able-bodied, but also have tended to disregard completely the experiences of persons with disabilities in nature (52). Moreover, the Western intellectual tradition has elevated human reason and civilization counterposed against primitive, savage instinct and nature, and associated people with disabilities with the latter (Mitchell and Snyder, "Precarity" 1440-41; Nocella II 398-400). Despite these problematic associations, ecocriticism and ecofeminism share with disability studies a critical focus on experiences of oppression as well as positive valuations of the diverse

characteristics of an ethical responsibility to all beings. Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood contends that our environmental crises stem from a human-centered “hegemonic reason” that has “othered” nature and ignores ecological connectivity: “hegemonic rationality is in conflict with ecological rationality and survival” (15).<sup>5</sup> Anthony J. Nocella II notes commonalities between disability studies and ecological concerns, proposing a “philosophy of *eco-ability*” to emphasize interdependence, diversity, and the unique contributions of “sentient and non-sentient” beings (389-96). Matthew J.C. Cella acknowledges that the inseparability of the body from its environment is not enough to merit bringing the two fields together; yet he argues that attention to literary representations of the “ecosomatic paradigm,” or “the contiguity between the mind-body and its social and natural environments,” exposes the “work of negotiating a ‘habitable body’ and ‘habitable world’” for people with disabilities (574-75). These points of convergence between ecocriticism and disability studies figure in Mesa’s story about characters who face ostracism and suspicion stemming from hegemonic conceptions of human rationality, dominance, and normative mind-body manifestations. A park provides the space for a nonnormative relationship to develop, while the characters’ ecological insightfulness disrupts the perceived stability of normal/abnormal to propose a positive valuation of disability.

Some disability studies scholars argue against applying medical diagnoses to fictional characters for it not only reenacts society’s desire to make nonnormate bodies legible, but also equates fictional lives with real ones. While these arguments have merit, I find more persuasive David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s argument that exploring a possible diagnosis can facilitate an understanding of how a narrative work represents and may reframe disability. These critics further underscore that attending to a character’s impairments supports a new materialist approach to disability studies, thus better recognizing that bodies are not passive recipients of social constructs, but also influence their environments.<sup>6</sup>

Attention to el Viejo’s behavioral and cognitive characteristics sheds light on the novel’s portrayal of nonnormativity whether or not the author had a particular diagnosis in mind. El Viejo’s atypical intonation, misinterpretation of social situations, focus on limited interests, tendency towards one-way communication, lack of same-age friendships, and difficulty functioning in work and day-to-day environments

point to autism spectrum disorder (ASD) ("Autism Spectrum Disorder," *DSM-5 Fact Sheets*; "Autism Spectrum Disorder," *National Institute of Mental Health*).

Regarding Casi, her behavioral and psychological qualities suggest the possibility of a personality disorder, characterized by deviations from cultural expectations regarding how one relates to oneself and others that cause difficulty functioning in a variety of situations. Of the ten defined types, Casi exhibits traits associated with avoidant personality disorder, i.e., timidity, sensitivity to criticism, fear of rejection, feeling socially inadequate, and avoiding school, or anti-social personality disorder, i.e., her impulse to skip school and lying to avoid discovery ("Personality Disorders"; Pickhardt; "What are Personality Disorders"). Nonetheless, Casi's desire for friendship and her sensitivity to el Viejo's needs are not representative of these diagnoses. Moreover, these responses also might be attributed to the emotional difficulties typical of the transition from childhood to adulthood and normal for someone who is the object of bullying. The narrator recounts that when she returns to school, the main bully has left, and Casi experiences less social awkwardness than she had previously, although she still wears over-sized clothes to hide her overweight body and covers her face with her hair. In terms of a disorder, the characterization of Casi is more ambiguous than that of el Viejo. Notably, the novel refrains from a certain diagnosis of either character. Rather than present caricatures, Mesa individualizes the experiences of the characters. Further, silence regarding a specific disability or disorder makes the reader conscious of his or her own tendency to pathologize and label people with different abilities.

### **Disability, Sexuality, Gender, and Public Anxiety**

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In the seminal disability studies work *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), Rosemarie Garland Thomson proposes that, similar to gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, ability and disability constitute historically and culturally situated markers of social inclusion or marginalization (6-8). Stigmatization of physical, mental, and behavioral traits forms part of the social process of defining disability.<sup>7</sup> Deviant bodies often are imagined as not fully human, in contrast to the *normate*, a neologism Garland Thomson coined to denote "the social figure free from stigma through which people can represent themselves as definitive human

beings" (8). Moreover, as Lerita M. Coleman-Brown notes, whether a particular trait carries a stigma and to what degree is temporally, situationally, and positionally dynamic (146-48). Garland Thomson argues that calling attention to stigmatization "resituates the 'problem' of disability from the body of the disabled person to the social framing of that body" (32). The problem is not disability, in other words, but rather the "inequalities, negative attitudes, misrepresentations, and institutional practices that result from the process of stigmatization" (32). Yet, persons who embody the normate depend on corporeal otherness for their social privilege and power. Disability studies has shown that literary and cultural works often have propagated the othering of people with disabilities via preconceived, unnuanced portrayals that affirm for the audience its normalcy.<sup>8</sup> Mesa's *Cara de pan* counters that model of representation.

Fear, stereotyping, and social control constitute three critical components of stigma, and all figure in the experiences of Mesa's characters.<sup>9</sup> El Viejo learned at sixteen that he was born of an incestuous relationship between his mother and grandfather. He perceptively explains to Casi that non-conforming people like himself are labeled as "monsters," but the monsters are those who have institutionalized him: "viendo ellos, los policías de la mente, lo bien que desempeñaba su trabajo en la reserva, con eficiencia y profesionalidad . . . viendo que todas sus teorías sobre los idiotas y los deficientes y los cretinos se desmoronaban y perdían toda validez, ¡acordaron encerrarlo!" (78). El Viejo points to the normate's fears that stigmatized others are not that different at all. In effect, his isolation affirms the desired difference and fortifies the stigma that marks inferior/superior hierarchization. Notably, with this observation, el Viejo reverses the typical psychiatrist to patient direction of diagnosis to also insinuate the cognitive intelligence of those with autism.<sup>10</sup>

Mesa's narrative highlights others' pervasive influence on el Viejo's sense of self. His acute self-consciousness about speaking at length on a subject indicates that he has received negative feedback about this conversational trait throughout his life. For example, in the midst of describing birds in detail shortly after he has met the teenaged girl, he remarks: "Estoy siendo pesado, dice, y pide perdón por segunda vez . . . él insiste, apesadumbrado: siempre habla demasiado y, si nadie le avisa, sigue y sigue. Necesita que alguien le avise, añade con desconsuelo, ¡él solo no es capaz de darse cuenta!" (11). In a con-



vergence of the narrator's and character's voices through free indirect voice, repeated words and words that signify repetition—"por segunda vez"; "insiste"; siempre"; "sigue y sigue"; "avisa," "avise"; "añade"—re-create the man's perseverative pattern and convey that his present feeling of burdening others is a product of countless past times in which people have expressed impatience and disinterest while conversing with him. Moreover, the shift from first to third-person narration bears el Viejo's internalization of an external narrative about him. Garland Thomson observes that disabled people learn strategies to eliminate the discomfort of the nondisabled (13). El Viejo's apologetic discourse indicates his understanding that he must manage himself to accommodate able-bodied persons. At the same time, a critique of social pressure to control a communicative pattern normal for him, but deemed abnormal by others, emerges from the narration of his self-consciousness and situates his disability within a social rather than pathological context.

For Casi, stigmatization occurs at school. Teachers insist that she engage with others in group work with the belief that it promotes equality; yet, Casi knows that she will learn better working alone, and that the teachers' method strengthens inequalities. Although a counselor characterizes Casi as having "*problemas de integración*," she simply may be introverted, experiencing awkwardness and confusion typical of the early teenage years (75). A peer's insults about Casi's physical appearance in the company of other female classmates, who laugh along, lower her social status and self-esteem, differentiate her from them, and confer power on the insulter and her friends. At the same time, verbalized differentiation also reveals her peers' fear of marginalization. Notably, Casi's classmates and teachers call attention to her when she is there, but no one notices when she stops attending school. Her body matters in their presence, as a differentiation that affirms their normalcy. El Viejo's empathetic response when Casi shares these experiences defies a stereotype of emotional disconnection among people with autism. Telling Casi that teachers hit him and schoolmates who lacked athletic skill were called "*mariquitas, mariconas o bujarras*" (44), he acknowledges the hostile educational environment that she experiences, and he exposes labeling as part of the social stigmatization process.

It is worth mentioning that el Viejo's schooling experience suggests that he did not receive instruction for special needs students.



If the narrative is set approximately concurrent with its publication date, as it appears, el Viejo would have been educated during the Franco dictatorship when autism was not diagnosed and when students identified as disabled largely attended separate schools. The protocol of segregation changed with Article 51 of the 1970 General Education and Finance of Education Reform Act, which directed that students with disabilities be educated in separate classrooms in mainstream schools, except for those with more severe handicaps, who would continue to be educated in special centers (Ley 14/1970). The 1982 Social Integration of the Disabled Act, known as the LISMI, set forth to integrate people with disabilities in schools, workplaces, and broader society, provide support and services, as well as shape societal recognition of their equal rights (Ley 13/1982).<sup>11</sup> Casi's complaint about integration reflects Spain's current educational policy.

*Cara de pan* manifests material embodiment in the entwining of environment with social interpretations of disability and difference. The good-natured tone with which Casi's so-called girlfriends ridicule her forces her complicity at school. Casi's self-removal from school enables her to consider her marginalization from a fresh perspective. In the park, Casi critically reflects on the insult "cara de pan":

Qué es en concreto una cara de pan? Hay montones de panes posibles, desde bollos bien gordos hasta *baguettes* finitas, y sin embargo ella intuye que cuando Marga le dice *cara de pan* se refiere más bien a lo primero—la cara redonda, fofa y blanca; la cara como símbolo de todo un cuerpo, de toda una entidad. (35)

Even though she settles on the unfavorable interpretation, Casi's contemplation on the slight highlights the arbitrary constitution of stigmatization and thus the possibility to defuse its power. Though difficult, stigmatized individuals can reject social judgments and contribute to destigmatizing their conditions (Coleman-Brown 154-58). The narration's use of indirect free verse conveys that Casi's thoughts also come from the narrator and thus form part of the greater message echoed throughout the story of diversity; whether of people, birds, or bread, all offer something unique and desirable.

From the start, *Cara de pan* creates an expectant tension that plays on readers' learned narratives about pedophilia. First and foremost, this older man approaches a teenage girl in an isolated area of a park. When el Viejo first encounters Casi, his exclamation "¡No quise asus-

tarte!" (9) suggests that he knowingly approached her rather than unexpectedly came upon her and his outstretched fingers imply that he might grab her. In another scene, he tells Casi that the police have prohibited him from speaking with children. In yet another, he recounts that he used to follow a female co-worker home and once entered her house to watch her sleep. These scenarios exemplify many that insinuate this man will accost the girl. At the same time, these scenes and others reveal that el Viejo has no intention of molesting her or anyone else. Instead of grabbing her, he places his hands by his sides after stretching his fingers. El Viejo later explains that police ordered the distance from children when he was found engrossed in conversation with them on a playground after having been drawn to their activity of tossing water balloons. Regarding his co-worker, el Viejo comments that he would not have followed her had someone explained that he should not. With these situations, *Cara de pan* incites the reader to guess what will happen next, thus calling attention to the ingrained practice of reading others based on social narratives. Revealing later the innocence of his motives, the narrative further proposes the fallibility of those dominant assumptions.

Through the character Casi, the narrative shows the inculcation of fear and mistrust in children about the intentions of unfamiliar adults. Casi's uncertainty regarding how to interpret this fifty-four-year-old man interested in an almost fourteen-year old girl derives from stories about sexual predation that circulate on the television news, in hushed conversations among adults, and at school. Casi's doubt also exposes society's fears about sexual deviance in relation to disability. She considers whether labels that adults use in speaking about sexual predators, "maníacos," "pederastas," "depravado," of whose meaning she is uncertain, apply to el Viejo (64). Casi's recollection of a psychologist's talk at school describing inappropriate touch as "*una manera rara*" (65) points to the confusion that children experience due to adults' indirect language when discussing sexual harassment. To a boy's question of whether a teacher grabbing the back of his neck constituted abuse, the psychologist caused additional puzzlement by asking for how long and if he moved his hand. Seeking to understand her relationship with el Viejo, Casi considers the contradictory messages she receives from adults who, on the one hand, urge her to make friends, but, on the other, would discourage this friendship: "Si nunca se relacionara con desconocidos, piensa, no

avanzaría. Un conocido ha sido previamente un desconocido, esto es así por fuerza: si fuéramos por la vida negándoles la palabra a quienes no conocemos, jamás conoceríamos a nadie” (64-65). Nevertheless, she acknowledges that at “casi catorce . . . las reglas del juego empiezan a ser otras” (64). Casi surmises that her peers, her parents, and other adults would qualify el Viejo as dangerous and condemn the relationship based on his age alone, yet she also upends the adults’ rationale, noting that he is timid, respectful, and has not touched her. By means of Casi’s consideration of how to qualify a man outside the normate, the narrative exposes the illogic of normative rules about friendship and the ambiguity of messages about sexual abuse.

In its portrayal of sexual desire, Mesa’s novel pushes against the either asexual or animal-like characterization of people with disabilities. Mitchell S. Tepper, who conducts research and workshops on sexual health and disabilities, observes that the public often mistakenly assumes people with disabilities are child-like and void of sexual desire (287). Sonya Freeman Loftis notes that people may misinterpret as hypersexuality the difficulty understanding social cues and need for sensory input in people with autism.<sup>12</sup> The novel takes on both of these assumptions. Many details in the episode of el Viejo’s engagement with children on a school playground debunk assumptions that someone with his qualities is simple-minded and harbors perverse sexual desire. For example, conscious that the children might be intimidated by his adult size, he sits on the ground so that they may better relate to him. He applies scientific reasoning when pointing out the changing color of the balloons stretching from the water’s weight and speculating with the children at what point the balloons will explode. Further, he contrasts the bursting water balloons with birds’ crops, which hold excess food. This example relates two scientific areas (physics and biology) to help the young kids understand both. Whereas el Viejo genuinely is interested in the children, he perceptively notes “lo verdaderamente horrible” that the teacher shows concern for them only after the police arrive (68). Moreover, he feels hurt by negative assumptions that others make about him, such as when the nicer of the two policemen calls him “un pobre zumbado” and when he learns that a neighbor, whom he regularly greets and for whom he carries groceries, alerted the police to his presence at the schoolyard (68). The passage shows el Viejo to possess affective intelligence, sensitivity, subject knowledge, care,

and maturity. Moreover, the anecdote highlights that fear of people who diverge from the normate is socially created. After initial trepidation, perhaps from instruction not to talk to strangers, the children eagerly gather around el Viejo, until a policeman scares them away: "como pollitos asustados, contagiándose del temor" (67). Finally, these passages expose the illogic of able-bodied people's interpretations of people with disabilities. One of the policemen assumes malice and, likely, voyeurism when el Viejo explains that he is wearing binoculars to watch birds. When the officer threatens to take el Viejo to the station for more questioning, he misinterprets his cooperation as insolence. Despite a complete absence of malicious intention from el Viejo's thoughts, reliance on negative narratives about people with cognitive disorders generally and as related to sex results in mischaracterizations that socially ostracize and institutionally punish him.

Through conversations about love and companionship, el Viejo's character expresses normative desire, and, thus, the narrative presents the complexity and humanity of people with disabilities. When the teenage girl in *Cara de pan* shares with el Viejo her disillusion with love, stemming from rejection by her older brother's friend, he alludes to the basic human need for amorous desire and affirms experiencing it: "Pero Casi, exclama al fin, ¡no hay nada malo en enamorarse, algún día te pasará y lo entenderás! ¡Él se ha enamorado un montón de veces y es maravilloso! ¡Como si el mundo entero se untara de mantequilla y todo fuese más sabroso y mejor!" (90). His mature perspective contrasts with the childlike mannerisms and speech Casi perceives in him, as well as with her teenage drama and uncertainty about love and sexual desire. Moreover, the simile that el Viejo employs to describe feeling love defies associations of disability with perversion and autism with disconnection. In his book-length study on disability and Spanish culture, Benjamin Fraser looks at the degree to which works demonstrate that a person with a disability shares behaviors or feelings of able-bodied people. That is, does a text suggest that the person is more than his or her disability? Mesa's character exhibits depth; he has perseverative behaviors, limited interests, and difficulty understanding communicative cues, yet he also is sensitive to his own feelings, empathizes with Casi, and describes love in a way with which many able-bodied people will identify. Through el Viejo's defense of love, the narrative supports Tepper's proclamation that people with disabilities should have access to sexual pleasure, an

experience that affirms our humaneness and connection to others in meaningful relationships (289).

The text showcases contradictory messages that young people receive about their bodies, sexuality, and social roles; a confusion exacerbated for girls with low self-esteem like Casi. Her determination to relate to her brother's best friend, on whom she has a crush, by researching his favorite band, suggests that she suffers from shyness and bullying rather than the extreme social inhibition associated with avoidant personality disorder. Though Casi might have misinterpreted a friendly kiss for a romantic one, and his restraint when she leans in for another might be preferred given an unspecified age difference, the boy's comment that her suitability for an affective relationship depends on her physical appearance showcases a critique Mesa's narrative delivers of judging people based on outward markers. While Casi does not have a physical disability, her weight positions her as nonconforming. When she recounts the event to el Viejo, Casi highlights a gendered power differential in affective relationships that devalues women: "Todo el mundo se ríe de las hermanas, de las esposas y de las madres, o insulta a través de ellas. Pero Casi no será nunca ninguna de esas cosas" (92). Further, the narration emphasizes patriarchy's permeation regardless of race and generation. El Viejo observes that Nina Simone was subjected to domestic violence, and his father-grandfather had confined his mother to the home and imposed a sexual relationship. *Cara de pan* interweaves allusions to patriarchy's threat to women's safety and wellbeing to represent its pernicious presence in society.

While pedophilic cues about el Viejo populate the narrative, misleading the reader, Casi's budding sexual desire and social narratives about sex induce her to seek an intimate relationship with him. Peers are dating; a female neighbor her age suggests that el Viejo might be sexually attracted to her; and stories about older men seducing younger girls pervade Casi's consciousness: "En su interior bulle ahora la prisa, o la necesidad, de forzar un desenlace acorde con su rebeldía tan ciega, y tan improductiva. O tal vez simplemente confunde las cosas, mezcla lo que se espera, lo que se teme y lo que se prejuzga, para que encaje con lo que es, lo que no tiene nombre" (94-95). Notably, Casi is aware that their age difference is nonnormative, but never considers his disability an impediment to a relationship. She finds companionship and acceptance with him and seeks

intimacy outside normative boundaries. With teenage-like circuitousness, Casi tries to find out if el Viejo is interested in her as more than a friend. To her question of whether he goes to the park to talk to her specifically, he responds: "Claro que es por ti, no me paro a hablar con los operarios ni con la mujer que me vende los bollos a diario, ¡vengo por ti!" (97). His obliviousness to her thoughts of intimacy highlight not his asexuality, as stereotypes of disability might impose, but rather his internalization of appropriate boundaries. In response, Casi presses on: "¿Hay algo en ella que le gusta? . . . A los hombres les gustan las jovencitas, ¿no es así?" (97). El Viejo's emphatic response leaves no doubt that he has only thought of her as a friend, and also reveals his familiarity with the stigmatization of aberrant hypersexuality and violence: "No, no, no . . . , el Viejo arruga el rostro. No, insiste, se lo jura, no es eso, ¡ella no debe tener miedo!" (98). Nonetheless, Casi concludes that rejecting a physical relationship confirms her unattractiveness and legitimates the insult "cara de pan." Casi knows that el Viejo is harmless; however, she purposefully equates his oddities with sexual danger to justify forcing a sexual encounter. That she must look for signs of insidious intentions and imagine him as a sexual predator indicate the inverse. Indeed, el Viejo becomes indignant at social norms that unjustly cast him as a public danger, and he upholds boundaries regarding sexual relations between adults and children.

The second part of the novel, which takes place approximately one year after the sexual event, accentuates the themes in the first part of stigmatization, prejudices, and privileges associated with gender and able-bodiedness. In her diary, Casi fantasizes about an intimate relationship and a normate identity free from peers' mocking. References to the diary throughout this section simulate the weight of this self-narration on her consciousness. Most notably, Casi's imagined self leads to the sacrifice of el Viejo, putting forth that the normate requires the deviance and ostracism of another: "Cada página que escribía en su cuaderno era un pasito seguro hacia su condena. . . . Mientras modificaba al Viejo, lo destruía" (111). El Viejo's disability does not produce deviant behavior; rather, Casi's fictionalizing him creates his deviance. Moreover, Casi condemns el Viejo not with her written words, but with her silence, never revealing that she invented the stories: "Casi callaba, contenía las lágrimas, y eso subrayaba— claro está—lo que ocultaba" (117). On the one hand, Casi uses expectations



based on his disability and her gender and age to avoid punishment for truancy and deceit. On the other, authority figures' questions and insinuations confuse her, and she is unable to articulate their unorthodox friendship. In conversation with el Viejo in the cafeteria, Casi recognizes the injustice of the unmerited treatment each received, he incarcerated and she pardoned.

### **Ecocritical Reframing of Disability, Nonnormativity, and Gender**

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An ecocritical perspective in *Cara de pan* forms the basis for a shift from measuring disabled people against normative bodies to recognizing the varied complexity of experiences and the advantages of alternative perspectives from disabled embodiment. Some disability studies scholars point out that while medical models of disability focus too much attention on the body, social ones can ignore the bodily experience altogether. In response to these deficiencies, Tobin Siebers proposes a theory of complex embodiment that recognizes multifaceted interactions and mutual influence between bodies and environments (325). Mitchell and Snyder, too, argue for an agential understanding of disability they call "nonnormative positivisms" to "revise[s], reinvent[s], and transform[s] the presumed superiority of normative practices, beliefs, and qualifications of what bodies count" ("Precarity" 1477-78). These new materialist disability scholars emphasize that people with disabilities are not passive recipients of their social, physical, and affective environments, as strict social constructivism would have, but rather influence those contexts as well ("Precarity" 1454). In this vein, Mesa's *Cara de pan* not only critiques medicalizing discourses of deviation or abnormality and considers disability from social contexts, but moreover engages with the natural environment to challenge what Siebers calls the ideology of ability, or "preference for able-bodiedness" (314). Narration of the disabled character's interactions with and affinity for nature, including birds, insects, and plants, supports the desirability of diverse human and non-human bodies. Further, representations of various natural elements contribute to the novel's criticism of patriarchal oppressions.

With the first scene, the novel suggests that an ecological consciousness reframes the obsessive focus on limited topics characteristic of autism syndrome disorder into a communicative asset. Upon approaching Casi the first time, el Viejo deploys his interest in birds



to connect with her in conversation. In response to her comment that she is reading a magazine about “*rollos de chicas*,” he exclaims: “Yo de eso no entiendo . . . Yo también leo revistas, dice, ¡pero las mías tratan sobre pájaros! . . . No sólo sobre pájaros, explica, sino sobre aves en general y animales en general” (10). Rather than a communicative deficit, his enthusiasm for birds becomes a pathway to a relationship with a morose teenager enticed by the antithesis of nature, entertainment industries that sell superficiality and depend on people spending time indoors in front of screens: “*Rollos de música y de videojuegos, y también de películas y de ropa, cotilleos y música, cotilleos sobre cantantes y actores*” (10). At first, nature serves Casi’s needs; hedges and tree branches provide refuge and a tree’s trunk the perfect support: “*el tronco del árbol . . . tiene una concavidad bastante lisa en la que puede apoyar cómodamente la espalda. Las ramas están repletas de hojas pequeñas y suaves, de un verde sedoso, que caen hacia los lados formando una especie de cobijo, con sus manchas de luz y de sombra*” (14). Over time, el Viejo teaches Casi, in part by example and in part through instruction, to listen attentively to bird calls, identify species, and note their particularities. His introduction of a bird identification game to facilitate her learning suggests his perceptiveness of how to interest a teenager in the subject. Further, in lending Casi his binoculars to observe the birds, he gives her access to his environmentalist perspective.

El Viejo’s appreciation of the natural world lures Casi to experience the same and even to identify with plants, birds, insects, and animals. Sitting in the hiding place in the park, she perceives nature’s dynamism: “*el nacimiento y la destrucción de un homiguero, la aparición de un nuevo tipo de insecto propio de la humedad, el musgo acumulándose en el tronco del olmo siberiano . . . un cachito de tierra, un microscópico ecosistema con su minúscula fauna y su minúscula flora*” (36). She imagines herself in that little bit of earth, “*escondida ahí, protegida y feliz*” (37). Although this passage first may seem to propose a prototypical protective mother earth, Mesa’s narrative confounds readers’ expectations. The movement of insects, moss, clouds, and more makes Casi aware of the passage of time, eventual end to her truancy, and therefore inevitably return to an environment that marks her as non-conforming. At the same time, interactions with el Viejo that encourage ornithological and botanical knowledge expand her self-esteem and thus equip her to better handle social outcasting: “*Lo que al principio*

le parecía inútil y aburrido—¡aprenderse los nombres científicos!, ¡reconocer el canto!—se ha convertido ahora en un divertimento e incluso en una muestra de distinción y superioridad: está convencido de que nadie—nadie—de su edad sabe tanto en ese campo como ella” (53). She even imagines a future distinguished career in ornithology. When Casi shares her father’s mocking of her interest in birds via expressions such as “*tener la cabeza llena de pájaros*”, el Viejo identifies with her, noting his similar subjection to bird-referenced name calling (53). In summary, the narrative resituates el Viejo’s autistic fixation on a topic into a vehicle for empowering and relating empathetically to another. Moreover, his passion redirects focus from the human self towards the diverse ecosystem.

El Viejo’s remarks about birds form part of a larger discourse in the novel that critiques hierarchical speciesism.<sup>13</sup> As the character observes birds in the park, he affirms his acceptance of all types, whether native or foreign: “las de fuera y las de dentro, no le importa de dónde vengan, ¡son verdaderamente extraordinarias” (11). Some examples of species he sees or discusses with Casi include *cotorritas de Kramer*, *tórtolas turcas*, *petirrojos*, *mirlos*, *estorninos*, *herrerillos*, *verdecillos*, *flamencos*, *moritos* and *picabueyes*. By highlighting this diversity, the narration puts forth that varied appearances and behaviors are both desirable and the norm. El Viejo’s perspective aligns with Mitchell and Snyder’s “nonnormative positivisms,” which proposes positive interpretations of disability and nonnormative difference (“Precarity” 1435). He relates his ornithological knowledge to stigmatization at school, comparing his and Casi’s experiences to certain species with markings to distinguish leaders from followers, “dominantes y dominados” (45). In an experiment in which scientists dyed the feathers of the weaker to look like the stronger ones, the birds were not fooled: “no era una cuestión de plumaje, sino de aplomo” (46). With this story, el Viejo alludes to the possibility, though difficult, for Casi to change her social role among her peers by projecting confidence. For el Viejo, however, the most interesting is a rebellious group that refuses to take either role: “Sobrevivir con disfraz, para esos pájaros, equivalía a morir lentamente” (46). That scientists wrote only a footnote about this group suggests a societal preference for dualistic identification (i.e., dominators or dominated). In contrast, el Viejo does not seek to dominate nature, but to understand, appreciate, and connect with it. By sharing this story with Casi, he indirectly advises her not to conform to expectations. Nonetheless, this interpre-

tation eludes the thirteen-year old: "¿Quiere decir que los dos son como pájaros teñidos?" (46). Her confusion suggests that el Viejo's cognitive ability defies the child-like manner of his speech. In other words, the story *Cara de pan* puts forth not only the ecological empathy, but also the mental acuity of this person with a cognitive disorder, repositioning disability as ability.<sup>14</sup>

Plumwood has argued that recognition of diverse communicative behaviors is critical to displacing anthropocentrism to achieve a dialogical intrahuman and interspecies ethics (189-95). As Garland Thomson explains, nondisabled persons experience confusion regarding how to respond when meeting a person with a perceptible disability and tend to notice only the disability (12). In Mesa's text, the disabled character's interactions with Casi via his love for birds revise her perceptions of nonnormativity. Casi's first impression of him as "medio de loco" (11), based largely on his outward appearance, shifts to a view that he merely presents an alternative way of being and interacting: "Con los días, comprende que esa es, simplemente, su forma de expresarse" (33). His unusual intonation and its incongruence with his emotions constitute difference, but not the danger she supposes her parents and other adults would assume. Rather than expect el Viejo to adopt normative communicative traits, Casi accepts his abnormalities and resists social narratives to interpret him and his ideas: "Casi aprende a no buscar interpretaciones en aquello que dice ni en el tono que usa para decirlo, y trata de centrarse solamente en lo que dice, en las palabras desnudas y sus efectos inmediatos" (34). Narrated in indirect free verse, el Viejo counters others' stigmatizing judgment of him as "el loco": "Él sólo tiene las conexiones cerebrales enlazadas de un modo diferente; ciertas conexiones, ¡no todas!, . . . algunas cosas no las hace muy bien - . . . pero en otras, en cambio, es un hacha, no tiene competencia!" (81). The same recognition of variation in his discussions of birds transfers to a self-evaluation that revises the normative perspective's negative view of his verbal and non-verbal traits to recharacterize disability as exceptional rather than problematic.

Rather than a passive object of others' misinterpretations, el Viejo actively challenges erroneous readings of him and his intentions. An interchange with Casi exemplifies not only his frustration, but also his effort to revise misconceptions about himself that amplify his sense of societal rejection. When el Viejo offers Casi a towel to make

sitting on the grass more comfortable and suggests she keep it in her backpack, she declines because she suspects her mother will wonder about its origins. On one level, the exchange indicates el Viejo's failure to understand social norms, but, on a deeper level, he rightfully points out: "¿Qué hay de malo en preocuparse por los demás?" (18) His focus is on care for another, while she understandably worries that her parents will discover she has been skipping school and meeting with an older man. Although el Viejo speaks to himself when he says "solo [sic] era una toalla," the text speaks to the reader at the narrative level about the arbitrary rules of social conduct that marginalize those who stray from them (19). The communication gap shakes Casi's formerly held conception of right and wrong, suggesting that those boundaries are malleable: "Está tan aturdida que ya no sabe qué es lo correcto: ni lo correcto en general ni lo correcto para ella, en ese momento" (18). In *Cara de pan*, el Viejo's nonconforming view exposes the arbitrariness of norms that govern social interaction and thus suggests the potential to redefine disability. Further, el Viejo's concern for Casi, coupled with his ecological perceptiveness, exemplify the ecofeminist relational ethics of care that Karen Warren proposes in which figure friendship, trust, and love (32-33).

The park setting plays a significant role in the novel's ecocritical revision of hegemonic perspectives on disability and exposure of anthropocentric tendencies. The area behind hedges, in which Casi and el Viejo meet daily, removed from the public's gaze, allows for the development of a deviant friendship. The trees provide support and shade, and the grass a soft ground on which to sit. Casi's sense of passing time comes from changes in the moisture-level of the grass rather than the school day. El Viejo's appreciation for birds, insects, and animals aligns him with nature; and yet in the simple gesture of placing a handkerchief on the ground to protect his clothes from dirt and offering a towel to the girl to do the same, Mesa subtly upends the trope of coupling disability with animality. Nonetheless, the park also is a space in which humans seek to tame and shape nature, a containment that shares with the normate an ideology of order to which disabled or deviant bodies present disruption and anxiety (Quayson 220-21). This tension characterizes Casi and el Viejo's experience in the park, which provides a refuge from societal pressure to conform to majority expectations, yet also contains ever present threats of imposing normative order. For example, the crew's color-coded uniforms call attention to the arbitrary division of

people into functions: orange for those remodeling the duck pond; green for the gardeners; and, yellow for the sanitation crew. Workers destroy and then build a new fountain, a construction that directs water's flow for aesthetic pleasure. They cut grass, trim hedges, and whack weeds, which drown out nature's sounds and control natural growth. They also collect trash, which suggests the futile attempt to erase contemporary consumption habits that entail waste-producing packaging (30-31). The park crew's activities highlight an anthropocentric perspective that natural settings are to benefit humans and that nature and human deviance are to be controlled.

The park also stages an androcentric entwinement of environmental setting with gender. The male crew's trivial conversations, such as complaining about one's wife or talking about football, bits of which Casi hears from behind the shrubs, point to a misogynistic and patriarchal societal undercurrent. Further, Casi had been going to a different park until two men approached and one tried to convince her to go with him on a walk. At almost fourteen years old, in the midst of puberty (she menstruates for the first time during the story), Casi senses her vulnerability to the male gaze and is conscious of a gendered aspect to corporeal judgement, remarking that people notice girls' developing anatomy more readily than boys'. Focalization reveals that although Casi thinks that she should be able to sit without worry in a park, she understands that the crew will view her through a sexualized lens and negatively judge her either way: "Todos son hombres y todos le causan un profundo respeto, pero no exactamente por ser hombres, sino por lo que puedan pensar cuando la vean allí—sola o acompañada—" (30). The groundskeepers' power comes from their social privilege as men to assess and stigmatize women. Casi's remark to el Viejo that she wishes she were a boy underscores the intense discomfort and fear that this persistent gaze and scrutiny perpetrates. *Cara de pan* makes clear that park spaces house potential violence against women and thus do not represent the leisurely relaxation offered to men. Moreover, the bodies of disabled persons also receive scrutiny. In these various ways, the narrative highlights the congruencies among patriarchy, able-bodied privilege, and human-dominant paradigms, all of which have oppressive impacts, on women, the disabled, and the environment.

In contrast, references to nature disassociate sexual violence and instinctual behavior from disability. As el Viejo walks towards Casi to

meet at their usual place on the day she accosts him, she visualizes that he is someone other than the person who crosses the hedge, takes out his binoculars, and identifies the type of parakeet in the highest branch of the Siberian elm tree. His respectful, gentle relationship with nature works against the generalized stereotyping that Casi employs to cast him as a rich older man who seduces young girls. When she pulls down her pants, presses against him, and feels for his penis, el Viejo's insistence that she clothe herself, his embarrassment, and his desire to flee confirm his platonic intentions and containment even if he may have been aroused: "su respiración se hace más hondo y animal" (102). The narrative positions el Viejo's affective connection to the natural environment, which bears his anguish at the breach in friendship: "Atraviesa los setos con tanta violencia que las ramas se quedan agitándose durante un buen rato, incluso cuando ya no puede oírse su carrera a lo lejos" (102). Paradoxically, el Viejo's violent departure and the hedges' subsequent agitation display the flawed assumption that people with disabilities harbor savage compulsions. When el Viejo returns to the park four days later asking Casi to never again touch him in that way, he introduces the subject of birds to ease the awkwardness between them. Telling her that he found "un agapornis perdido, muy triste, muy desorientado," which he was able to feed after much patience, this man with nonnormative communication employs a clear metaphor—a lovebird—to express to Casi his distress, affection for her, and forgiveness of her transgression (104). The birds' silence, which el Viejo notices when the police arrest him in the park, insinuates injustice. When the characters individually return to the refuge after having been banned, el Viejo by a restraining order and Casi by her parents, the natural elements no longer provide a nurturing space for their friendship. Casi notices that the gardeners have planted a double row of hedges, making it difficult to enter into the patch of grass, and the tree seems more majestic, no longer comforting. Workers look at el Viejo suspiciously, and a policeman asks for identification. El Viejo observes that a pair of blackbirds pecking for worms in overgrown grass look at him indifferently: "¡El refugio ya no les pertenecía a ellos! ¡Ahora tenía otros dueños!" (112). Although Casi laments these changes, el Viejo prioritizes the blackbirds' use of the refuge over their own, expressing ecological sensitivity in recognizing that the birds benefit from their absence.

*Cara de pan* concludes with a scene that emphasizes the entrenchment of stigma and public discomfort with disability and nonnormative



relationships. Exercising her authority, the cafeteria waitress tells Casi and el Viejo that they must order another drink to remain. Although their consumption of just one each in three hours may motivate her, also likely is their deviance from the normate: “rebajando el nivel del lugar, jugueteando con trozos de papel, ensuciándolo todo, entrelazando sus dedos sin respeto, sin decoro, desobedeciendo la autoridad . . . el Viejo ridículo, patético, con pinta de colgado y de enfermo, y la niña destartalada, con la ropa grande, creyendo que así se oculta los kilos que le sobran, la niña acomplejada, rara y boba” (136). In contrast to the waitress’s condemnation, Mesa’s novel emphasizes the need for empathetic acknowledgement and openness to others’ uniqueness. Faced with an imminent end to their reunion, el Viejo takes off all but one napkin-ring he has made and offers it to Casi, who, in turn, makes a ring for him. Likening the rings to those used to track birds, el Viejo suggests their attachment to each other and yet freedom to go their own way. This symbolic exchange not only rebuffs hegemonic disapproval of their relationship, but also affirms an eco-ability paradigm of interdependence among heterogeneous human and nonhuman beings who sustain one another. Both characters understand that the idea they once shared to move to a cabin in the woods with views of stunning sunsets, away from societal judgment, is unrealizable. Casi and el Viejo leave the cafeteria, pause to look at each other, and depart in opposite directions. The narration that el Viejo walks towards the past and Casi towards the future, both with an asymmetric step, suggests that as the work of fashioning a habitable world for people with disabilities continues, deep attention to natural surroundings facilitates receptiveness to diverse bodies and modes of perceiving and interacting. Mesa’s text invites readers to imagine a future in which ecological, co-relational empathy and justice are the norm.

## Notes

- 1 To date, Mesa has published the novels *El trepanador de cerebros* (2010); *Un incendio invisible* (2011, 2017), Premio Málaga de Novela; *Cuatro por cuatro* (2012), finalist, Premio Herralde de Novela; *Cicatriz* (2015), Premio Ojo Crítico de Narrativa; *Mala letra* (2016); and *Cara de pan* (2018); short story collections *No es fácil ser verde* and *La sobriedad del galápagos* (2008) Premios de Cuentos Ilustrados, Diputación de Badajoz; poetry, *Este jilguero agenda* (2007), Premio Nacional de Poesía Miguel Hernández; and the essay *Silencio administrativo: Pobreza en el laberinto burocrático* (2019).
- 2 These characterizations of Mesa’s writing come from my own observations, as well as interviews of Mesa by María Ayete Gil and Eva Blanco Medina, a newspaper review of *Cicatriz* by Francisco Estévez, and a scholarly article by Beatriz Calvo Martín.
- 3 Ayete Gil remarks that Mesa frequently situates her stories in closed spaces.



- 4 See Encarnación Juárez-Almendros for a discussion from 2003 on growing interest within Hispanic literary studies in disability. Benjamin Fraser's 2013 single-authored book is the first on disability in contemporary Spanish studies. His focus on intellectual disabilities contrasts with the greater awareness in Spain of physical disabilities. Connie Scarborough's 2018 monograph is the first on disability in medieval Spanish texts.
- 5 Plumwood also argues that although global capitalism's roots are in western rationality, this economic system enacts an irrational denial of ecological reality (24).
- 6 Mitchell and Snyder respond to Michael Bérubé's argument against applying medical diagnoses to literary characters. Bérubé instead emphasizes analyzing the narrative strategies employed in portraying disabilities ("Precarity" 1451-55).
- 7 The relatively few studies to date on disability in Spanish literature suggest prudence in providing an explanation of this foundational understanding of stigma. Garland Thomson draws on Erving Goffman's stigma-theory (Garland Thomson 30-32; Goffman).
- 8 For example, in addition to Garland Thomas, see Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*.
- 9 Coleman-Brown theorizes that stigma arises as a response to difference and its unpredictability. Social hierarchies emerge to create separation from stigmatized differences. Nonetheless, stigmatized people are not powerless for their own and group responses to stigmas can change social views.
- 10 Mitchell and Snyder's reading of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, a North American novel about a boy with autism, led me to note this inversion. In that novel too, the protagonist's affinity for nonhuman beings decenters human exceptionalism ("Precarity" 1457-60).
- 11 See Chocarro de Luis for an overview of the antecedents to inclusive education in Spain.
- 12 She explains that Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* conforms to a prevalent association in the early twentieth century of disability with uncontrollable impulses and sexual violence (745-76).
- 13 *Cara de pan* connects mistreatment of people with disabilities to the environmental crisis. El Viejo remarks on climate change's impact on habitats and migration with the same anger as when he speaks of the mental clinic where, to gain his release, he conformed to behavior and treatments the staff deemed favorable, but which he knew worsened his mental condition.
- 14 Robert Melchior Figueroa proposes that Plumwood's argument to recognize intentional communication in nonhumans suggests for critical autism studies a means to counter the attribution of empathetic deficiency in autistic people.

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