Blood, our gushing forth, our growth, our life is blood … thick, fat animating, our life; it reddens, moistens, drenches, fills all the flesh with mud, it gives it growth, it surges to the surface, it covers people with earth … it strengthens people, it fortifies people greatly. – Sahagún¹

Beliefs and notions concerning the significance of blood are among the oldest surviving concepts from the earliest days of human existence.² This vital substance has symbolized a vast array of cultural concepts that include the role of blood within the ritual of human sacrifice to the significance of the discarded red liquid produced during a women’s menstrual period. The conceptual artist Ana Mendieta is best known for her Silueta series: “works which resulted from the artist either placing her body, or constructing a surrogate form of herself, on what she regarded as the maternal earth,”³ which were created and performed from 1973 to 1980, and often utilized a mixed tempera/blood medium to produce several provocative and intriguing performance pieces.⁴ In this paper I intend to analyze the different aspects of the blood symbolism that oozes from Ana Mendieta’s visceral performance piece Untitled focusing on the significance of blood in relation to ritual sacrifices carried out by early Latin-American and Mesoamerican religions while also examining the symbolism of the vital liquid as it pertains to a woman’s menstrual period and the power and suspicion this bodily fluid once held for early-indigenous cultures. Lastly, I will examine the blood in Untitled as an emblem of ethnicity, a


⁴ Heidi Rauch and Frederico Sruro, “Ana Mediesta’s Primal Scream,” Americas 44/5:44 (1992), 44.
grouping concept that concerned the Spanish colonists as they violently overpowered the lives of the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica and the Caribbean, people whose blood they believed to be impure and vastly inferior to their own. By exploring the various manners in which the blood featured in *Untitled* can be understood, I plan to show that each concept, although vastly disparate, possesses the undercurrents of displacement, and how Mendieta reclaimed the literal and figurative definition of this notion to visibly proclaim the acceptance of her exile, her gender, and her ethnicity.

I

By viewing a still of *Untitled* (fig. 1), which Mendieta performed at the Hotel Principal while traveling in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1973, the viewer instantly is aware of the profuse amount of blood spilled and splattered throughout the composition. The artist’s naked body, completely concealed beneath a white sheet, lies on a stone slab as a mutilated cow’s heart rests on her upper abdomen. The red liquid has a presence, brooding and malevolent, as it pools between the artist’s covered legs, vociferous and disturbing as it intermittently coats the ground. It is obvious that Mendieta allowed the “most immediately available and instantly impressive pigment, blood” act as the main focal point, to play the star of *Untitled*.  

The most readily given answer for Mendieta’s frequent use of blood as medium in a large number of her art works, especially *Untitled*, which prominently displays a dissected animal heart, is her interest in religious ritual sacrifice. Cuba, the artist’s homeland, is the birthplace of Santería, a religion with Afro-Cuban roots that rose out of the cultural clash between the Yorùbá people of West Africa and the

Spanish Catholics who brought them to the Americas as slaves. Mendieta was extremely interested in the veiled religion, and conveyed that curiosity through her artwork. It can be said, due to the fact that Mendieta executed Untitled while in Mexico, that the indigenous peoples of that country and their religious beliefs also inspired this particular piece. Both the displaced Afro-Cuban santeros who still participate in the act of killing animals as a way to appease the orishas, and the ancient, indigenous Nahuas of central Mexico who partook in human sacrifice to revitalize their gods, and to ensure the success of their agricultural crops, look to blood as a vital force that aids them in nourishing and communicating with their deities.

![Fig. 1: Untitled, 1973, Oaxaca, Mexico](image)

The beliefs and rituals of Santería are far too complex to elucidate in this paper, especially as the religion is obscured in secrecy and often misinterpreted by those who have not been initiated into its clandestine realm. The aspect of the religion that pertains to Ana Mendieta and the blood medium of her artwork is also the most misconstrued and scrutinized feature of Santería; animal sacrifice. To better understand the origins of this practice, one must know the basic history of the

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religion; the people who created it, and the conditions under which it was conceived.

The people of the Yorùbá nation originally settled along the northwestern shore of the continent of Africa, in modern day southern Nigeria, and by 1000 CE small city-states began to develop along the coast between the Niger and Mono rivers. In the mid-1400s, after the armies of the cross conquered the Islamic powers that controlled the Iberian peninsula, Portuguese sailors began to plunder the west coast of Africa, and by 1448, with the approval of the Catholic Church, they brought the first African slave to Europe. Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, desiring their country to become a colonial empire, sent Christopher Columbus to discover new trading routes to India but, because of erroneous navigation, the sailor and his men landed in what would eventually be called the Caribbean in year 1492. These new found lands, especially Cuba, were thought to possess abundant riches and agricultural commodities, including gold, silver, and sugar cane, and the Spanish began importing Africans for slave labor to mine these precious metals and work the aggregation of sugar plantations. By the nineteenth century, 500,000 to 700,000 Africans had been transported to Cuba, most of them of Yorùbá and baKongo descent. With these captured and displaced people came their traditions, customs and gods.

According to Mary Anne Clark, *Santería* is one of the numerous syncretic religions conceived by

7 De La Torre, 160.
8 De La Torre, 161.
9 De La Torre, 161.
11 De La Torre, 162.
Africans transported to the Caribbean islands to work on the sugar plantations. These slaves had their own religions, which included possession trance for communicating with ancestors and myriad deities, animal sacrifice, sacred drumming, and ritual dance.

Both in slavery and later when free, the Yorùbá in Cuba and their descendants maintained a number of African religious practices by developing complex parallelisms among their experiences with their Yorùbá ancestry, the other African traditions that had been brought to Cuba, and the Roman Catholicism that was the official religion of the island.

Forced to conceal their beliefs from their Spanish masters, the transplanted Africans masked aspects of their religion, integrating Catholicism and its established saints (which were incorporated as disguises for the orishas), in order to appease their European overseers. The ritual sacrifice of animals, an important facet of Santería, is one such aspect that the religion’s followers to this day keep concealed from non-santeros due to the stigma that it entails. Animal sacrifice is one of the most controversial aspects of this religion.

Sacrifice, the giving of natural and manufactured items to the Òrìshà or ancestors, is viewed by practitioners as essential for human well-being. Through sacrifice, it is believed, one restores the positive life processes and acquires general well-being. To fulfill the wants and needs of the Òrìshà and the ancestors, practitioners make sacrifices to them. In return, the Òrìshà and ancestors are expected to meet the needs of the practitioners.

Only an ordained santero or santera who has undergone a secret ordination called the “Knife of Oggun,” the orisha, who provides the tools for human survival, may sacrifice a four-legged animal, “slicing open its jugular veins and catching the blood of the sacrifice in the orisha’s tureens.” The blood of the sacrificed animal is what the orishas feast upon; it is what nourishes

12 Clark, 117.
13 Clark, 117.
14 Murphy, 81.
15 Clark, 123.
16 De La Torre, 126.
the deities, persuading them to positively intercede in the affairs of their followers. Through the blood collected during the act of animal sacrifice, the followers of Santería believe that they have the ability to feast, speak, and dance with the orishas, the elemental powers of life who, when pleased with a santero’s sacrificial offering, bring human beings worldly success and heavenly wisdom.\(^{17}\)

When hundreds of thousands of captured Africans were forcibly brought to the shores of Cuba they were powerfully compelled to discard their native traditions and absorb the Church’s beliefs and commandments. Unwilling to forsake their indigenous gods, the Afro-Cubans appeased the Spanish colonizers by altering the outer appearance of their religion, renaming it Santería, the worship of the Catholic saints. Santería is often described as a syncretic religion, that is, it was altered and acclimatized as African slaves left their homeland and entered Cuba. All religions are syncretic, including Christianity, a religion that takes on various forms depending on the particular culture it infiltrates, although the Church often denies the many discrepancies in beliefs that exist from one society to another.\(^{18}\) Miguel A. De La Torre states,

> By masking the syncretism of the dominant religion while accenting the syncretistic nature of the marginalized one, the dominant culture imposes a value system upon which the former is viewed as a purer representation of the truth while the latter is perceived as a distortion.\(^{19}\)

The animal sacrifices that accompany the rituals of Santería are often thought of as acts of witchcraft by many of those belonging to the Christian faith, and are frequently identified with evil and the taboo since it is Other and not fully understood by Westerners. Untitled, along with a

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17 Murphy, 82.
18 De La Torre, 126.
19 De La Torre, 126.
variety of other works produced by Mendieta, can also be viewed as unsightly and immoral by those who believe art should represent a Europeanized definition of beauty, and by those who think that women artists should create art that pertains to domesticity and the warmth and essentialism of motherhood. By featuring blood, sacrifice, and mutilation in works such as *Untitled*, Mendieta has purposefully over-stepped the boundaries of the norm and presents to the viewer a piece of art that confronts the typical standards of mainstream Western thought, and blatantly questions the role of the Europeanized syncretism of faith-based rituals that has dominated and attempted to extinguish misunderstood aspects of Other religions that do not comply to the Church’s convictions for over fifteen-hundred years.

I believe that by frequently using blood as the medium in several of her artworks and performance pieces (e.g. *Tracks*, 1974 (fig. 2), *Corazon de Roca con Sangre*, 1975 (fig. 3)), often with blatant *Santería* overtones, (*Chicken Piece*, 1972 (fig. 4), Mendieta illustrates that she is unwilling to mask or disguise the religious beliefs of the once conquered, enslaved inhabitants of Cuba, the homeland from which she was temporarily banished. She is willingly uniting herself and her body with the rituals of *Santería*, a religion she was never initiated into, purposely illustrating the admiration and pride she possesses for her Latin-American heritage, unashamed of the objectionable aspects of a faith that is often viewed as foreign or Other to the Europeanized West and admonished by the Church. Through her art, she attempts to “renew bonds with her homeland and express the pain of rupture that is a large part of Cuban history,”20 a rupture that is ever present in aspects of *Santería*.21 By holding a freshly decapitated chicken, writhing and wriggling in its last moments of life, letting its warm blood wash over her nude

21 Fusco, 122.
stomach and legs, as she did in the performance piece *Chicken Piece*, Mendieta is communicating to the audience that she is unwilling to mask or disguise her Cuban roots, even if it causes viewers to question her motives and “exotic” actions. According to Coco Fusco, “Ana drew on rituals and symbols that affirm social bonds, connect the practitioner to the past, and seek to overcome limits of time, space, and morality.”

By incorporating *Santeria* inspired motifs into her oeuvre, Mendieta is speaking for those Afro-Cubans who were forcibly taken from their native land, as she was, whose resilience in their religious beliefs allowed them to maintain a small part of their indigenous identity in alien, inhospitable lands. The abundant amount of blood featured in *Untitled* can be viewed as the artist’s personal offering to a revered *orisha*.

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22 Fusco, 122.
nourishment for a deity in exchange for worldly realization and wisdom that can only come from the knowledge and acceptance of one’s past.

Although the blood featured in Mendieta’s *Untitled* has regularly been identified with the concepts of *Santería*, it is also reasonable to examine the symbolism of the red substance as it pertains to the indigenous people of Mesoamerica, due to the fact that the performance piece was executed while the artist was traveling in Oaxaca, Mexico, the native home of the Nahua people, and because a large amount of the iconography that she employs in her art work is largely derived from Mexican and European sources.23 She once said, “Plugging into Mexico was like going back to the source, being able to get some magic just by being there.”24 Due to the fact that Mendieta remained exiled from Cuba until 1980, Mexico may have served as a surrogate motherland, a haven where the artist did not feel as Other, where she was able to establish some

24 Fusco, 125.
metaphysical connection with her place of origin.

The Nahua people of central Mexico, which once included the Aztecs, were conquered by Hernán Cortés and his army of Spanish and indigenous Mesoamericans in 1521 with the fall of Tenochtitlan. “The Spanish quickly set about creating institutions to bring indigenous life and culture under control, to establish an ordered Christian society, and to make the new provinces or kingdoms profitable to the Spanish King.”

With these abrupt and radical cultural changes forcibly placed upon the lives and social practices of the Nahua people came the end of the human sacrifices that were vital to the continuation of their religion. Human sacrifice, as it pertained to the Nahuas, has been persistent and conspicuous in most of the stereotypes that claim to reflect the historical reality of pre-Hispanic societies. The Nahua’s participation in ritual killings has often been employed to justify the cruel exploitation of the Indians by the Spanish, and incorporated as a tool to illustrate the backward ways of the Nahuas, a people, according to the Spanish, who needed Christianity to aid in the curing of their blood-thirsty, pagan ways, and adopt the refined manners of the European-Christian faith.

According to López-Austin, there are at least four categories concerning sacrificial killings that pertain to the Nahuas: the “images,” the “payments,” the beds, and the owner’s skin. Since these various purposes are somewhat complex, I will offer an extremely brief explanation of each. “Images” refers to the teteo imixiptlhu, who were men possessed by the gods and died in a rite of renewal, a concept that stems from the Nahua belief that “it was


26 López-Austin, 376.

27 López-Austin, 376.

28 López-Austin, 376.
necessary to perform a rite linking the time of man to the mythical time that a god would die so his force might be reborn with new power.”29 In the Nahua mindset it was the god who perished to ensure the renewal of the important crops indigenous to their land that guaranteed their survival, not mortal men. The second category, the “payments” or nextlahualtin, originated with the idea that the gods, the Sun, the god of rain, or cuauhtecah, were in desperate need for a vital source, and if they did not receive this essential substance of blood they would fade away and inevitably die.30 “It was believed that if the hunger of dangerous gods was satisfied, starvation, mortality, illness, and violent manifestations of nature could be avoided.”31 The third category was called pepchin or “beds,” men who were slaughtered so that they might be a faithful companion to the teteo imixiptlahuan, the “images,” who needed sufficient servants on the road to the other world.32 The fourth category were men, the xipeme, who were killed, then stripped of their flesh so that others may wear their skin in order for their tonalli to temporarily receive the god Xipe Totec, the Mesoamerican god of spring and new vegetation.33

The four main categories of human sacrifice elucidated by López-Austin all revolve around the notion of rebirth and renewal, and Untitled is an artistic example of this concept. “As though in the tradition of seventeenth-century vanitas paintings, this Sileuta reminds the viewer both of the threat of death and the promise of rebirth.”34 The Nahua killed so that their way of

29 López-Austin, 376.
30 López-Austin, 376.
31 López-Austin, 377.
32 López-Austin, 377.
33 López-Austin, 377.
life and their means of nourishment would thrive and ensure the survival of later generations. In the Nahua religion, blood revitalized the sun, it “bought,” from the gods a military supremacy that allowed the Nahuas to expand their power, and it fed and invigorated all the different lords of the universe.\textsuperscript{35} The blood in \textit{Untitled} can be viewed as the vital substance that feeds and mollifies the indigenous gods of the land upon which the artist was, at that moment in time, lying. The intention behind the plentiful amount of blood within \textit{Untitled} that saturates the sheet covering the artist’s body, as well as the stone slab on which she rests and the stone floor below her, is not to repulse the viewer through the gratuitous use of the red liquid, but to illustrate that anything the blood of a sacrificed being (in this case Mendieta) touches, according to Nahua beliefs, was considered holy.

The priests officiating at sacrifices anointed the lips of the images with the blood of those killed in their rites, and they flung drops of the blood to the four quarters of the horizon so that all the gods throughout the length and breadth of the earth would receive part of the feast.\textsuperscript{36}

In the opinion of the Nahua people, blood was not a substance that signified violence and death, but a liquid with the ability to coax the gods to grant new life, to present to the Nahuas with another season of growth and continued existence.

The heart, resting silently displaced on the artist’s chest, also held great significance to the Nahua people since the organ was thought to possess the attributes of vitality, knowledge, inclination and feeling and also held references to memory, habit, affection, will, direction of action and emotion.\textsuperscript{37} According to Nahua beliefs, the heart, the \textit{yollotl}, was an organ “subject to

\textsuperscript{35} López-Austin, 326.
\textsuperscript{36} López-Austin, 326.
\textsuperscript{37} López-Austin, 190.
change, for good or bad, from the outside, and it could be modified by the weather, magic, and slavery.\textsuperscript{38} By prominently displaying a bloody, dislocated heart in \textit{Untitled}, Mendieta is referencing the vitality and the knowledge of the Nahuas that was forcibly cut and severed from the indigenous peoples when Spanish colonizers abruptly discontinued native-religious rituals, ultimately disuniting the Nahuas from the intense connection they shared with their inherent land. Through \textit{Untitled}, and other performances encapsulated in the \textit{Silueta} series, Mendieta, by placing her body in or on the earth, “expresses her desire to establish her place in the world by retracing an elemental connection with nature”\textsuperscript{39} while also commenting on the life-giving aspects of the cyclical earth, a concept of regeneration the Nahuas unconditionally accepted as true. By alluding to the act of human sacrifice and featuring blood in \textit{Untitled}, Mendieta is connecting with the essence of pre-Hispanic Mexico and the rituals of the indigenous Mesoamericans, rituals that were deeply tied to the workings of nature, rituals the Spanish colonizers refused to comprehend. By using blood mixed with tempera in \textit{Untitled}, Mendieta exemplifies her pain and illustrates her sorrow for the loss of indigenous ideas concerning sacrifice, life, and renewal. Although the sight of spilled blood typically initiates fear and concern in many Westerners, Mendieta presents to the viewer of \textit{Untitled} blood in the manner which the Nahua Indians of central Mexico regarded the vital liquid: as a symbol of re-growth, possibility, and continuance.

\textsuperscript{38} López-Austin, 190.

\textsuperscript{39} Fusco, 122.
Menstrual blood is a bodily fluid, along with breast milk, that is unique to women. The blood in *Untitled* can be identified with the red liquid produced during a women’s monthly period due to the fact that Mendieta was unapologetic about her sex and intertwined and stressed her femininity into the majority of her artwork. While a considerable amount of the artist’s oeuvre is influenced by the religious practices and rituals of her indigenous country, the earliest performance pieces she rendered specifically focused on the examination of female subjectivity and identity. One of the most well known of Mendieta’s body pieces is *Rape Piece* (fig. 5), a performance in which the artist staged her own violent sexual violation as a response to the rape and murder of a fellow co-ed at the University of Iowa in 1972. Mendieta concocted a macabre scenario for the evening art class that was scheduled to meet in her room. When her classmates arrived at the scheduled destination they found her "tied to a table, bent over, nude from the waist down, and blood was all over the place." In her *Silueta* series, to which *Untitled* belongs, Mendieta uses her own body as medium, projecting her femininity on to her organic canvases, alluding to the notion of the goddess, joining forces with the energy of the earth to bring forth new existence. Woman as the giver of life is a concept that precedes the structure of modern patriarchal societies and early cultures seemed to have realized though not scientifically as we do today, that the blood of a woman’s menstrual period was associated with the powerful capacity

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40 Blocker, 15.

41 Rauch and Suro, 44.
to produce and carry new life. But the fact that women cyclically produced a bright-red liquid from between their legs caused the female sex to be viewed as the ultimate Other, which constituted the need for women to be isolated monthly, prohibited from taking part in daily life.

Fig. 5: *Rape Piece*, 1972

Women’s blood, with its vague capacity to give life and signal death of a potential child inspired various ritualistic customs that usually incorporated segregating a menstruating woman from her people, keeping careful consideration to separate the women from the men. According to Grahn, among the Native Americans of California a girl at her first menstruation was thought to be possessed of a particular degree of supernatural power, and although this was not always viewed as malicious, there was a strong feeling concerning the capacity of evil her condition inherently possessed.

Not only was she secluded from her family and the community, but an attempt was made to seclude the world from her. One of the injunctions most strongly laid upon her was not to look about her. She kept her head bowed and was

42 Meyer, 48.

forbidden to see the world and the sun. Some tribes covered her with a blanket.44

Although in numerous cultures fresh menstrual blood was thought to play a functional role in the formation of a new human being,45 many societies, such as the Nahuas and their modern counterparts, thought of the red liquid as unclean and dangerous. Lopez de Corella a doctor from Navarre, Mexico, states, “Blood that is menstrual has poisonous effects: it endangers plants, it darkens metal, it makes dogs go mad.”46 A small ethnic group who inhabits the Ivory Coast of Africa named the Beng takes care to isolate a menstruating woman forbidding her to enter the forest or touch a fledgling agricultural crop for fear her power would decimate all that is natural or organic.47 In Southeast Asia, a menstruating woman may be wrapped in a hammock and shut up in a hut, or forced to lie down in the dark for several nights prohibited from speaking.48 Even the eyes of menstruating women were thought to have special powers for she could not look at others for fear of sickening them, and they were particularly banned from touching or cooking the food for any other being.49 “Western reports say that tribal men were sometimes so frightened of female blood as to believe a single drop could kill them, and that if her hands touched their weapons they would come to harm on the hunt.”50 The natural, biological act of

44 Grahn, 15.
45 Meyer, 49.
46 López-Austin, 298.
48 Grahn, 18.
49 Grahn, 18.
50 Grahn, 5.
menstruation created and nourished cultural rituals that instigated gendered norms that perpetually made visible the fundamental differences between the sexes.

Menstrual blood was and in many cultures still is considered forbidden, viewed negatively, and rarely discussed due to its taboo nature. The word taboo derives from the Polynesian tapua, meaning both “sacred” and “menstruation,”51 a term that has been twisted and misconstrued in Western society. The aspect of sacredness is often overlooked or widely unknown in the origin of the term taboo. Along with being feared and misunderstood in numerous societies the act of menstruation and the blood it produces is considered numinous.

In German, menstruation is Regel, in French regle, and in Spanish las reglas.

All theses words mean ‘measure’ or “rule” as well as “menstruation” and are cognate with terms regulate, regal, regalia, and rex (king). These terms thus connect menstruation to orderliness, ceremony, law, leadership, royalty, and measurement.52 Early modern Europeans equated blood metaphors with fertility and symbolically superimposed them upon the natural world.53 Trees, rivers, and “active forces” like night, snow and light, all natural symbols of fertility, were nearly consistently represented by the feminine gender in languages such as Latin and German.54 A Master of the Earth, a religious leader in sub-Saharan Africa states, “Menstrual blood is special because it carries in it a living being. It works like a tree. Before bearing fruit a tree must first bear flowers. Menstrual blood is like the flower: it

51 Grahn, 5.
52 Grahn, 5.
53 Meyer, 50.
54 Meyer, 50.
must emerge before the fruit – the baby – can be born.” The capacity for menstrual blood, according to the beliefs of numerous indigenous cultures, to one day form a human being is a highly revered ability that, while not always viewed negatively, has been incorporated to segregate women from men, accentuating female Otherness, which ultimately allows the gender gap to widen.

The blood within Untitled can symbolize the female blood of menstruation, encapsulating the biological act’s gendered specificity, and the cultural seclusion it places on women. Mendieta thrusts her femininity onto the majority of her art work thereby celebrating her gender and lauding all of its aspects. Menstruating, which is often thought of as a curse, should be viewed as an affirmative rite of passage that girls must travel through in order to arrive at womanhood, and varying cultural customs that derive from the process of menstruation are not always associated with the negative. “In other cultures menstrual customs, rather than subordinating women to men fearful of them, provide women with means of ensuring their own autonomy, influence, and social control.” Menstruation brought about close-knit female factions that formed through the shared isolation of gendered bleeding, and I believe that the blood of Untitled speaks of this notion. By using a medium that has the capacity to be viewed from many symbolic stand points the rituals surrounding menstruation must be considered. The Silueta series focuses on the relationship that Mendieta shared with the earth, which to the artist represented an essential origin, the bearer of all in existence. A woman’s ability to give birth, to monthly produce an egg that has the capability to be fertilized and form into a human being, mirrors the earth’s elemental aptitude to create. Viewing the blood of Untitled as menstrual blood can bring to mind the

55 Gottlieb and Buckley, 58.
56 Gottlieb and Buckley, 7.
segregation and cruelty that menstruating has instigated for women, but it also speaks of the one biological aspect that links and envelops all of woman-kind. According to Blocker, “Woman refers both to an individual and to a group, to a collectivity that is achieved in spite of difference,” but womanhood is not only a connection that is constructed through variation, it is also a bond that is formed through shared experience; menstruation. The white sheet that covers the artist’s body, which contrasts starkly with the blood strewn throughout the composition, may also refer to the bloody sheets often associated with the wedding night. This blood, caused by the tearing of a virginal hymen, also originates from between a woman’s legs yet it signifies a woman’s prior chasteness and purity and is viewed quite differently from menstrual blood; a substance that is regularly linked with effluence and contaminated discharge. Mendieta knew that as a woman artist her works would almost always be viewed through a feminist lens and by viewing the blood in Untitled as menstrual blood the artist is reclaiming her femininity and embracing the “curse” placed upon her by displaying it as an honored ability that emulates that of Mother Earth.

III

The “purity” of the blood that flowed through a person’s veins was of great importance to Spanish colonizers, and New Spain’s elite justified their dominance over colonial ethnic groups due to the notion of “European racial and religious superiority.” According to numerous scholars, ethnicity was the primary basis of social differentiation in the Spanish colonies that

57 Blocker, 61.

58 Nora E. Jaffary, False Mystics: Deviant Orthodoxy in Colonial Mexico (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004), 54.
caused a fundamental chasm between the Hispanic world and the indigenous one.\textsuperscript{59} According to Goldman, ethnicity is the “set of activities, traits, customs, rituals, relationships, and other emblems of signification that are rooted in a group of people,”\textsuperscript{60} and the Spanish colonizers, finding indigenous cultures supremely Other, not only subjugated the Indians due to their societal differences, but also because of the “impure blood” that ran through their veins, which invariably demarcated their social and moral traits.

During the eighteenth-century, there was a European preoccupation with taxonomies and classifications, and in New Spain, artists began to produce \textit{casta} paintings as a way of visually categorizing the various racial outcomes when “pure” European blood mixes with the “inferior” blood of an indigenous Indian or transplanted African, and the moral character of said offspring. \textit{Casta} paintings, according to Carrera, were a part of a “diagnostic system that oversaw, affirmed, and maintained the social alignments and order of late eighteenth-century New Spain.”\textsuperscript{61} “Mixing of the so-called ‘races’ was an uncontrollable process” that produced “hybrid” races, such as \textit{mestizos} and \textit{mulattos}, which were often portrayed in \textit{casta} paintings as tranquil and placid, yet could also be classified as lazy deviants who could never equate to the “untainted” European physical or intellectual ideal.\textsuperscript{62} The term \textit{casta} was utilized in eighteenth-

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{60} Shifra Goldman, “The Iconography of Chicano – Self-Determination: Race, Ethnicity, and Class,” \textit{Art Journal}. 170


\textsuperscript{62} Jose F. Buscaglia-Salgado, \textit{Undoing Empire: Race and Nation in the Mulatto Caribbean} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 174
\end{footnotesize}
century New Spain in referring to a person of “impure blood,” a raza who was specified by his lowly calidad – his subordinate quality and status.  

Calidad represented one’s social body as a whole, which included references to skin color, but also often encompassed, more importantly, occupation, wealth, purity of blood, honor, integrity, and place of origin. Thus a mulatto was not solely associated with darker skin or other physical characteristics, it also aligned a person to certain diagnostics, such as debased social and moral traits.  

According to Spanish colonizers a person’s quality of blood dictated how a person acted and presented himself; it spoke of a person’s ethical character. “As the cuadros de castas demonstrate, this was a project not of freedom, equality, and mercantile expansion, but of racial oppression, institutional stability, and home rule.”  

Casta paintings were a means for the Spanish to exalt their self-proclaimed superior status over the indigenous who were forced to succumb to the colonizer’s European notions of religion, race, and genetic supremacy.  

Baptismal records were also of significant importance in eighteenth-century New Spain because a person was required to present his parents’ and grandparents’ baptismal documents to affirm his ancestry, “in order to be admitted to universities, professions, certain guilds, and noble orders; to avoid paying tribute (required from Indians and mulattoes, those of mixed Spanish and African blood) or imprisonment for debt.” An individual’s blood, which was often believed to manifest itself through skin color, and hair texture, was also thought to be a measure of one’s dialect, social manner, physical presence, and moral character. The colonial Hispanics believed that a person of Indian or African blood was incapable of conducting himself with the same

63 Carrera, 6. 
64 Carrera, 6. 
65 Buscaglia-Salgado, 179. 
66 Carrera, 4.
noble grace and gentility as a person of untainted Spanish blood, and made sure that one of questionable heritage would never be able to enter the ranks of the upper class by recording the blood status of infants born in New Spain:

When a person was born his name was entered in books that categorized a person’s class: the ‘libro de color quebrado’, book of mixed bloods, or people of broken color, and the ‘espanoles limpios de todo mala raza,’ Spaniards clean of bad lineage, meaning without stain of Black African, Moorish or Jewish blood. 

Once an infant was verified to be of authentic Spanish stock, she was given a limpieza de sangre, a certification that confirmed the purity of her Spanish blood. According to eighteenth-century Hispanic thought, blood was believed to channel the inherent quality of a person; the dominating life force that ultimately drove an Indian or African to partake in unsightly deeds and cultural practices that could not be denied to them due to the persistent liquid coursing through their being. The European colonizers justified the subjugation of the indigenous peoples of Mexico and the Caribbean through the establishment of class hierarchies based on the “purity” of one’s blood, a substance that the Spanish believed ruled and regulated the fate of the body in which it was housed. Correlating darker skin and unfamiliar cultural customs with substandard physical and mental performance, the Spanish immediately forced indigenous Indians into subservient positions, punishing them for their lack of knowledge of European culture and society. Spanish colonization of the Americas set the standard of categorizing moral character, and intellectual capability through the gradation of skin color; this grouping practice based on the “purity” of one’s blood, conceived in the late seventeenth century, was still enduring when Menedieta arrived in the American Midwest during the late twentieth-century.

67 Carrera, 2.
68 Carrera, 2.
Mendieta was removed from her homeland of Cuba in 1961 at the age of 13 through the assistance of a United States Government funded undertaking dubbed Operation Pedro Pan that reallocated numerous Cuban children, the majority without their parents, to the United States. During this time, Mendieta’s parents were viewed as possessing anti-Castro sentiments, and “felt that it was better to send their daughters to the United States alone than to risk subjecting them to the kind of strict indoctrination and alienation from paternal authority that the revolution promised.” Mendieta’s family were members of the Cuban upper class, who were not copasetic with Castro’s socialist notions of a classless society, and instead of being forced to associate themselves with the country’s lower class, or lose their bourgeois privileges, the family chose to flee. Mendieta and her sister arrived in America during a time in which the country was coming to terms “with the baleful consequences of its own repressed colonial past”; the Vietnam War, civil rights, and “intense battles over racial purity.” According to Blocker, “In this period, with events such as the forced integration of the University of Mississippi and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many whites became increasingly fearful for the loss of racial and social purity.” Arriving in Iowa, Mendieta and her sister faced on their own “the racism and cultural ignorance of a homogeneous American environment,” and were berated for the color of their skin which was much darker than most Iowans, “who were predominantly of

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69 Blocker, 51.
70 Blocker, 52.
71 Blocker, 52.
72 Blocker, 53.
73 Fusco, 122.
Northern European ancestry.” Her ethnicity, the very blood that flowed through her veins, was deemed inferior by light-skinned classmates, who feared and ridiculed that which was unfamiliar and Other.

During her high school years, there were instances where Mendieta was called “whore” and “nigger” by racist peers, who did not understand, and therefore feared, her Otherness. These types of experiences led Mendieta to separate herself from whiteness and identify herself as a “woman of color” and as a “non-white.” By doing this, Mendieta willingly abandoned the notion that non-Westerners should strive to emulate the often-dominant white culture. Although she became a citizen of the United States in 1970, her emotional center, her self-proclaimed identity, remained rooted in Cuba through personal choice and preference. The negative response from various white classmates concerning her ethnic origin and skin color prompted her to self-consciously research Afro-Cuban ritual and music and Latin American history as means to discover her indigenous roots, a portion of her self that possessed the possibility of withering as she became deeply immersed in American culture. The blood in _Untitled_ may very well be viewed as the basic substance within non-white people which Spanish colonizers and modern Americans alike deem impure and inferior to European blood, which was thought of as a venerated liquid that aided in the Western justification of raping and physically, emotionally, and culturally dislocating the indigenous people of New Spain.

The Spanish colonizers were eager to categorize the various “races” of the colonized lands in order to laud their own ethnic group and stifle those who were considered to possess

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74 Blocker, 53.
75 Blocker, 53.
76 Fusco, 122.
impure blood and inferior genetic makeup. The fact that Mendieta completely concealed her body with a white sheet, and poured an exorbitant amount of blood throughout the composition of *Untitled* illustrates that once the sanguine fluid departs the veins of a being, there is absolutely no way to visually differentiate the blood spilled from the body of a white person and blood spilled from the body of a Cuban, Mexican, of African, male or female. All blood is red; it does not come in varying shades or diverse consistencies according to skin color. Mendieta was seen as Other when she arrived in the United States, tormented because her language, appearance, and cultural practices varied from the norm. Instead of succumbing to a life of whiteness, assimilating herself to the homogenous manners of the European/American ideal of womanhood, Mendieta clung to her roots and showcased her heritage through her art. The red liquid of *Untitled* is the artist’s proof that blood is not a relevant substance by which to judge the capabilities of a person, and also symbolizes that she not only accepts her ethnicity but also celebrates it with pride.

**Conclusion**

The majority of scholarly texts concerning the work of Mendieta attribute the subject matter of her art to her abrupt evacuation from her indigenous Cuba, that through her art she was healing an internal wound afflicted due to her forced displacement. In some aspects this notion may be true, but through examining the blood symbolism within *Untitled*, it is my opinion that Mendieta reclaimed that which made her Other. The blood that is prominently displayed in *Untitled* not only has the ability to symbolize the significance of animal and human sacrifice, the connotations of a woman’s menstrual cycle, and the basic foundation of ethnicity; it also embodies the very blood that flowed through Ana Mendieta’s veins. To Mendieta, a Latin-
American who consciously yearned to be closely associated with the rituals of her exiled land, a woman who was familiar with the violence and prejudice directed toward her gender, and a person who was isolated and harassed because of the color of her skin, the blood within Untitled speaks of the obstacles she faced while on the path to becoming an internationally known artist. Mendieta stated, “I started immediately using blood, I guess because I think it’s a very powerful and magic thing,” and the various symbolic aspects housed within the artist’s own blood did indeed aid in allowing her art to strike a powerful chord throughout the art world.

Blood is often viewed as a substance that aids in the racial and gendered categorization, a liquid that separates and divides, but by pouring the red substance throughout Untitled Mendieta is illustrating its sameness. Outside of the veins, it is invariably red and cannot be differentiated on a visual level by gender, race, or class. It is a unifying liquid that has fascinated humans since the earliest times, and Mendieta herself was aware of the potency it possessed. Instead of alienating viewers by varying social constructs, the artist has chosen a medium that is familiar and basic to all human beings. Mendieta may have struggled with displacement issues throughout her life, but by conspicuously featuring blood in many of her works she is asking the viewer to delve deeper into the symbolism of the red liquid, to study its significance and role in cultural customs. It is my belief that she knew who she was, that she was confident in her Otherness. Through Untitled, Ana Mendieta lays bare the aspects of her being that could be considered foreign and feared. By featuring such a symbolic liquid in Untitled Mendieta is asking her audience to question the superficial racial and gendered prejudices that continue to pervade contemporary societies and to realize that the blood that originates in a one’s being should not be used as a means to judge who her validity as a person.

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77 Rauch and Suro, 44.