

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Black in space: Arnaldo Tamayo and the Cuban cosmic revolution

Gloria Maritza Gómez Revuelta 

Departamento de Estudios Jurídicos, Sociales y de la Cultura, Centro Universitario de Los Altos,
Universidad de Guadalajara, Guadalajara, Mexico

Email: ggomez@colmex.mx

Abstract

Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez, the first Cuban, Latin American, and person of African descent to travel to space, has experienced a significant evolution in his persona since his historic flight aboard Soyuz 38 in 1980. This article explores three pivotal phases in this transformation: first, his portrayal in the media as a pioneering Cuban cosmonaut, which positioned him among the socialist elite of the Space Age; second, the controversy regarding the identity of the first Black person in space, which brought renewed attention to Tamayo's achievements; and third, the ongoing reconfiguration of his image through social-media platforms, allowing for broader engagement with diverse audiences. By applying the principles of persona analysis to a multilingual set of historical documents and images related to Tamayo, this study illustrates the malleability of his self-fashioning for different audiences and how it has adapted to reflect changing sociopolitical contexts and the evolving landscape of public representation in the digital age.

The 1981 painting *Kosmonauten* by Soviet artist Yuri Korolev vividly captures the camaraderie of an international crew of cosmonauts, their faces alight with the thrill of exploring the unknown (Figure 1). At the far left, a Cuban cosmonaut stands out among his Eastern European counterparts; his dark skin and broad smile create a striking contrast to the rest of the cosmonauts surrounding the iconic Soviet hero, Yuri Gagarin. This is Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez, the first Cuban, Latin American, Spanish-speaker and Black individual to fly beyond Earth's atmosphere. In September 1980, Tamayo blasted off aboard Soyuz 38 alongside Soviet commander Yuri Romanenko, embarking on a historic seven-day mission that heralded a new era of diversity in space exploration. The mission was a testament to the revolutionary ideals of his homeland and the socialist vision of international cooperation in outer space.

The emergence and evolution of Arnaldo Tamayo as a technocelebrity of the global Space Age is a historically complex process.¹ Since his flight in 1980, there have been a series of gradual transformations in Arnaldo Tamayo's persona, each infused with new meanings for changing audiences that resonate with the turbulent history of Cuba from the Cold War to the present day. What forces have driven these changes? For which audiences has Tamayo's

¹ The global Space Age is a concept whose historiography is increasingly decentred, decolonized and inclusive, as Alexander Geppert shows in this special issue's introduction. See Alexander C.T. Geppert, 'Rocket stars, space personas and the global Space Age', *BJHS*, this issue.



Figure 1. Yuri Korolev, *Kosmonauten (Cosmonauts)*, 1982. Courtesy Ludwig Forum for International Art Aachen, Loan Peter and Irene Ludwig Foundation. Photograph: Carl Brunn.

persona been redefined? What broader discussions surrounding race, revolution, socialism, American hemispheric tensions and diplomacy have shaped the narrative of Arnaldo Tamayo's identity? Furthermore, how do individual legacies and large-scale sociopolitical processes reshape one another?

In this article, I argue that the transformation of Arnaldo Tamayo's persona into a technocelebrity of the global Space Age is a multifaceted historical process shaped by the interplay of various factors, including the evolution of the Cuban Revolution, historical understandings of Latin American identity and hemispheric tensions, shifting understandings of racial categories, and the technoscientific practices of socialist internationalism, spanning from the early 1980s to the present. I further contend that this evolution can be understood through three distinct phases of persona crafting, each influenced both by multiple creators and by audiences. The first phase – discussed throughout two sections – focuses on the meticulous crafting of Arnaldo Tamayo's persona by a coordinated effort of Soviet and Cuban governmental, military and media institutions. This strategic campaign leveraged Tamayo's spaceflight as a propaganda tool to bolster Cuban national pride amid growing discontent and emigration. It promoted the Cuban Revolution as a beacon of technological progress in the western hemisphere, and showcased the benefits of Soviet–Cuban cooperation on the international stage during a challenging period for Cuba within the Third World community. In the second phase, the emphasis shifted to Tamayo's ethnic identity, particularly his African heritage. This change was prompted by debates within the African American community in the United States following astronaut Guion Bluford's 1983 flight with NASA. Tamayo's racial identity became a focal point in discussions about representation and achievement in space exploration. The third phase unfolds in the post-Cold War context, where Tamayo's identity is continually reassessed and reshaped by diverse audiences questioning the relevance of a hero whose celebrity was forged under a regime now perceived by some as outdated. The ongoing transformation of Arnaldo Tamayo's persona reflects the complexities of identity and cultural representation of Cold War technocelebrities in a rapidly changing world.

By examining these three phases, we can better understand both the historical significance of Tamayo's journey and the intricate ways in which individual narratives intersect with larger cultural and political discourses. The concept of 'persona' serves as a lens through which we can explore broader societal issues and geopolitical agendas related to issues like race, nationalism and the legacies of socialism.² Analysing Tamayo's evolving identity allows us to explore both synchronic struggles and diachronic transformations, highlighting how identities are negotiated and redefined in response to historical and contemporary challenges. This article suggests that while a persona's status is contingent on sociopolitical factors, these variables offer (astro)cultural resources that sustain their celebrity status. In other words, they leverage contingencies to maintain their legacies.

In alignment with the themes of this special issue, the concepts of emergence, fabrication and patrimony are central to analysing Arnaldo Tamayo's journey as the first and only representative of Cuba in space. These concepts help us to understand why Tamayo was selected and prepared for this role, identify the historical actors and institutions involved in shaping and promoting his public persona, and explore his evolving legacy as a hero of the Space Age navigating the twenty-first century. By examining the motivations, means and forms – both discursive and material – that have shaped the construction and transformation of Arnaldo Tamayo's identity, we gain valuable insights into how astroculture manifests in Cuba. Tamayo's persona, and his maintenance of his own legacy, provide glimpses into a space technoc celebrity's strategies for self-fashioning, but his decisions also index the broader sociopolitical changes happening at the time.

The discursive and material conditions by which Tamayo's persona circulated, along with local visions of outer space, are collected into the broad concept of astroculture, but with a distinctly Cuban twist. While astroculture refers to the unique array of images, artefacts, media and practices designed to ascribe meaning to the cosmos, Cuban astroculture draws explicitly upon Cuban ideals of revolution, internationalism and both Afro-Cuban and Latin American cultural elements.³ Wishing to be a leader of the Third World but aligned to the USSR; part of the Soviet Bloc but culturally, geographically, and historically situated in the Americas; in the western hemisphere, so proximate to the United States and aspects of its internal racial politics, and yet socialist, Tamayo's persona indexes the vagaries of Cuban astroculture in the Cold War, as space exploration became a means for propaganda, diplomacy and asserting Cuban exceptionalism.

As the following sections will demonstrate, Cuban visions of the cosmos were not merely imported from Moscow to Havana. Instead, they were shaped by Caribbean traditions, aesthetics and rhythms, resulting in unique interpretations of outer space that resonate deeply with the revolutionary ideals of Cuban leadership of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Arnaldo Tamayo's persona emerged as the first embodiment of this distinct and under-researched form of Caribbean astroculture.

Being Black in space: an oversight in histories of the Space Age

Unlike other prominent figures of the Space Age, such as Vikram Sarabhai in India, Qian Xuesen in China, or Arthur C. Clarke in Sri Lanka – whose processes of persona crafting are

² The introduction to this special issue offers a concise insight into the origins and historical debates and uses of persona, understood as the production of the public self, beginning with Marcel Mauss's work from the 1930s up to Lorraine Daston, Paul Herman and David Marshall's most recent reflections on the category. See Geppert, *op. cit.* (1).

³ Alexander C.T. Geppert, 'European astrofuturism, cosmic provincialism: historicizing the Space Age', in Alexander C.T. Geppert (ed.), *Imagining Outer Space: European Astroculture in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd edn, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018 (*European Astroculture*, vol. 1), pp. 3–28, 8.

discussed throughout this special issue – Arnaldo Tamayo has a limited presence in historical accounts of the period. The former figures occupy higher positions within a global Space Age hierarchy that is structured by familial metaphor: Sarabhai is known as the ‘father of the Indian space programme’, Qian Xuesen as the ‘father of Chinese spaceflight’, and Clarke as the ‘father of satellites’.⁴ Even Sigmund Jähn, the first and only cosmonaut from East Germany – who did not lead any space programme or develop any major inventions in space technology – has been given the title of ‘grandfather of all German space travellers’.⁵ In contrast, Tamayo remains in the more modest role of ‘brother’ among the prominent figures of the global Space Age discussed in this special issue.

The limited historiographical focus on Tamayo, coupled with his relatively low recognition in retrospective analyses, may be attributed to several factors: Cuba’s lower global profile in spacefaring matters compared to India, China and Germany; the challenges of accessing Cuban documentary sources; the Caribbean island’s commitment to the socialist principle of equality; or perhaps a deeper, systemic lack of interest in how astrocultural practices and discourses manifest in developing nations with limited space capabilities. Tamayo might not hold a prominent position in space historiography, but is nonetheless present and identifiable within the era’s family of space personae.

Nonetheless, some historical approximations to Tamayo have been articulated from two main analytical viewpoints: first, in studies that intertwine race and outer space; second, in those that place him in the broader constellation of cosmonaut studies. Two recent historiographical analyses have homed in on Tamayo’s Black identity.⁶ Cathleen Lewis argues that it wasn’t until Guion Bluford – a US-born African American – made his spaceflight aboard NASA’s *Challenger* in 1983 that Tamayo’s condition as a Black cosmonaut was explicitly brought to the forefront of his public image. She notes that

the remarkable thing about Arnaldo Tamayo Mendez’s role in this debate is that his race was not the burning issue at the time that he flew in orbit, at least not within the context of the Cold War. It was not until Bluford’s flight three years later that Tamayo Mendez’s identity within Cuban social strife became a subject of widespread discussion.⁷

In a similar tone, Damaris Puñales-Alpizar recognized Tamayo as a multilayered signifier who filled a quota by being not only the first Afro-descendant cosmonaut (thus showcasing the advantage enjoyed by the socialist system in the Space Race) but also the first from a Third World country. The present article enriches Lewis’s and Puñales-Alpizar’s claims by drawing on Spanish-language historical and contemporary sources, allowing for an exploration of the features of Tamayo’s persona that were highlighted before his racial identity.

Previous English-language analyses of Arnaldo Tamayo often uncritically translate *negro* as ‘Black’, creating a false sense of semantic equivalence and ignoring the distinct cultural

⁴ See Haitian Ma, ‘Leapfrogging India: Vikram Sarabhai and the developmental promise of geocentric space-flight’, *BJHS*, this issue; Alexander C.T. Geppert and Lu Liu, ‘The celebrification of Qian Xuesen’, *BJHS*, this issue; and David Skogerboe and David Baneke, ‘The prophet business: Arthur C. Clarke, Sri Lanka and the making of a global space persona’, *BJHS*, this issue.

⁵ Tilmann Siebeneichner, ‘Showcasing Germany in space: the lives and afterlives of Cold War rocket stars Sigmund Jähn and Ulf Merbold’, *BJHS*, this issue.

⁶ Cathleen Lewis, ‘Arnaldo Tamayo Mendez and Guion Bluford: the last Cold War race battle’, in Brian C. Odom and Stephen P. Waring (eds.), *NASA and the Long Civil Rights Movement*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019, pp. 145–66; Damaris Puñales-Alpizar, ‘Socialismo mulato: Soviet fascination with race in Cuba’, *PALARA: Publication of the Afro-Latin/American Research Association* (2021) 25, pp. 1–10.

⁷ Lewis, op. cit. (6), p. 146.

and political contexts that shape each term. In Cuba, as in other Latin American countries, official discourse has long downplayed race and denied racial hierarchies, rooted in the ideology of *mestizaje* – the notion that racial mixing dissolved distinctions and fostered post-racial harmony.⁸ Since the 1960s, the Cuban government has claimed to have eliminated racial discrimination, casting racism as a foreign problem, particularly tied to the United States.⁹ As a result, racial difference was deemed irrelevant to national identity, and racial affirmation among non-white Cubans was seen as unnecessary and incompatible with revolutionary ideals.¹⁰ A transnational analysis of Tamayo's public representation as a Space Age technocelebrity reveals a broader linguistic and ideological distinction: the Spanish term *negro* cannot be regarded as a semantic equivalent of the English 'Black', as its historical usage has unfolded within cultural and political contexts that do not ascribe to it the same function as a racial identifier or symbol of sociopolitical resistance.

A second scholarly line analysing Tamayo is in cosmonaut studies, which have demonstrated how these spacefarers were transformed into symbols of socialist internationalism through space collaboration, as well as representatives of the values of socialist-aligned nations.¹¹ Colin Burgess and Bert Vis, for instance, present Arnaldo Tamayo in their chapter on the Cuban Salyut mission within their history of Interkosmos, the Soviet-led international space exploration programme.¹² Their interpretation inserts Tamayo into a broader nation-centred historiographical account of socialist technoscientific enterprises. Interestingly, they also address Tamayo's life after Interkosmos: his participation in Cuban society after Soyuz demonstrates that his public image has been forged in spheres other than the purely scientific or technological.¹³

Cosmonaut studies show that Tamayo's persona has been crafted in accordance with the blueprint set by Yuri Gagarin, the first soviet spacefarer. The same has been true for most cosmonauts who flew within Interkosmos: portrayed as coming from a humble ethnic family and having been subjected to foreign oppression (either fascist or imperialist), they received modest schooling before their training in military aviation, the main requisite for becoming a cosmonaut.¹⁴ As we will see, this cosmonaut blueprint was malleable, adjusting to cosmonauts across geographical regions and historical contexts. Just as Gagarin's image was repurposed by Vladimir Putin in the early 2000s as a means to strengthen Russia's identity through the acceptance of the Soviet past, Tamayo was used as a token

⁸ Emiko Saldivar, 'It's not race, it's culture': untangling racial politics in Mexico', *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* (2014) 9(1), pp. 89–108.

⁹ Danielle Pilar Clealand, *The Power of Race in Cuba*, New York and Oxford: Oxford, 2017.

¹⁰ As noted by Lawrence Venuti, 'Domesticating' translation practices – which prioritize fluency and create the illusion of semantic equivalence – can homogenize these differences, reducing them to fit dominant linguistic norms. In contrast, 'foreignizing' approaches resist this ethnocentric violence by exposing the difference of the source text and disrupting the target language's dominant cultural codes. When translating directly from Spanish, I 'foreignize' the term *negro* by retaining the lower case, in accordance with Spanish grammatical conventions, which do not capitalize racial, ethnic or national adjectives. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004 (first published 1995).

¹¹ Slava Gerovitch, 'The human side of a propaganda machine: the public image and professional identity of Soviet cosmonauts', in James T. Andrews and Asif A. Siddiqi (eds.), *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture*, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2011, pp. 77–106; Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies: Public Images, Private Memories, and the Making of a Cultural Identity*, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2015; Andrew L. Jenks, *The Cosmonaut Who Couldn't Stop Smiling: The Life and Legend of Yuri Gagarin*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012.

¹² Colin Burgess and Burt Vis, *Interkosmos: The Eastern Bloc's Early Space Program*, Cham: Springer, 2015.

¹³ Scholarly accounts of science, technology and engineering in Cuba present Tamayo as the expert who both handled and represented Cuban space science in the early 1980s. See Wilfredo Márquez Álvarez Yribar, 'Física cubana en el cosmos: a 40 años del vuelo espacial conjunto', *Revista Cubana de Salud Pública* (2011) 37, pp. 569–81.

¹⁴ Gerovitch, op. cit. (11); Jenks, op. cit. (11); Rex Hall, David Shayler and Bert Vis, *Russia's Cosmonauts: Inside the Yuri Gagarin Training Center*, Chichester: Springer, 2005.

of Cuban internationalism at a time when the nation's place as a Third World leader was being questioned.¹⁵

The limited historiography on Tamayo prompts a deeper exploration of the construction and evolution of the Cuban cosmonaut's identity. However, it offers two important points of departure: first, race became a significant aspect of Tamayo's identity that gained prominence in public discourse only after Guion Bluford's 1983 flight. This shift sparked discussions about which achievements of Afro-descendants on either side of the Cold War were worthy of recognition. Second, Tamayo should be analysed as a product of both the Cuban and the Soviet space propaganda efforts, while also highlighting what distinguishes him among his peers in the realm of space exploration. He holds the unique distinction of being the first and only Cuban, Latin American and Black cosmonaut to symbolize socialist technological prowess in a region heavily influenced by NASA.

Studies of Arnaldo Tamayo-as-cosmonaut are in need of a more profound dialogue with the historiography of Cuba's shifting and uneasy relations with the USSR between the island's 1959 Revolution and 1991.¹⁶ This uneasy relation shifted from stinging criticism of Latin American communists' subordination to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, as well as of real socialism in the early 1960s, to the island's joining COMECON in 1972, and the island's increasing ideological rapprochement towards and economic dependence on the USSR.¹⁷ Thus Tamayo opens up a window to examine how Cuban astroculture evolved vis-à-vis Soviet astroculture; however influential the USSR might have been over the Caribbean island by the time of Tamayo's spaceflight in the early 1980s, Cuba developed its own, distinct forms of imagining and representing outer space. As I will show below, Cuban astroculture brought discursive, visual and aural elements of Caribbean, Afro-Cuban and Latin American political and sociocultural tradition to the Soviet spaceflight endeavour. The following section illustrates how Havana and Moscow collaborated to prepare Tamayo for his prominent role, meticulously documenting and presenting this process through various media, including images, films and sound.

A Cuban cosmonaut for the socialist world

Ever since Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin's assertion during his 1961 visit to the island that it would not be long until Cubans flew into the cosmos, the idea of a Cuban cosmonaut had long been anticipated.¹⁸ Gagarin attended the Cuban celebrations of the eighth anniversary of the 1953 uprising against Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship. President Osvaldo Dorticós named Yuri Gagarin the first member of the Playa Girón Order, a distinction given to either Cuban or foreign citizens who have excelled in the fight against imperialism, colonialism or neocolonialism.¹⁹ Gagarin's visit to the island and the bestowal of this revolutionary distinction on him was thus a keystone moment in Cuban astroculture: from this early period of the

¹⁵ Klaus Gestwa, "'Kolumbus des Kosmos': Der Kult um Jurij Gagarin", *Osteuropa* (2009) 59(10), pp. 121–51.

¹⁶ Soviet–Cuban relations again became strained with the political and economic reforms implemented by Gorbachev in the late 1980s. After the fall of the USSR in 1991, Cuba entered a so-called special period of economic hardship and austerity. See Rafael Rojas, *Historia Mínima de la Revolución Cubana*, Mexico: El Colegio de México, 2015.

¹⁷ Odd Arne Westad, 'The Cuban and Vietnamese challenges', in Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 158–206; Vanni Pettinà, *Historia mínima de la guerra fría en América Latina*, Mexico: El Colegio de México, 2018; Michelle Getchelle, 'Cuba, the USSR, and the non-aligned movement: negotiating non-alignment', in Thomas Field Jr, Stella Krepp and Vanni Pettinà (eds.), *Latin America and the Global Cold War*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020, pp. 148–73.

¹⁸ Cathleen S. Lewis, *Cosmonaut: A Cultural History*, Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2023; Caterina Gianfranco, 'Gagarin in Brazil: reassessing the terms of the Cold War domestic political debate in 1961', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 63 (2020), e004.

¹⁹ The order is named after the site of the Cuban victory in the US American-backed invasion of the Bay of Pigs in 1961, an episode which must be understood within a longer history of US–Cuban Cold War tensions. For

island's revolutionary history, space exploration became inextricably linked to revolution, anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism.

When and by whom would Gagarin's prophecy of a Cuban in space be fulfilled? What would be the logic of the selection, training and preparation of the first cosmonaut from this small Caribbean island? The face of socialism in the western hemisphere in outer space was to be Arnaldo Tamayo, an Afro-Cuban fighter pilot from the small province of Guantánamo. A husband and a father, Tamayo had prepared for his military career both in Cuba and in the USSR. He participated in reconnaissance flights during the Cuban missile crisis, a 1962 international conflict sparked by the revelation that Soviet ballistic missiles had been positioned in Cuba, placing a direct threat to US American security on the shores of the Caribbean.²⁰

In 1977, requirements for Cuban cosmonaut candidates were made public by the Cuban propaganda system. In the selection process, many institutions were involved: the campaign was organized by the Department of Revolutionary Orientation of the Cuban Communist Party with the assistance of the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union and Cuba.²¹ The Defensa Antiaérea de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (DAFAAR, Anti-aircraft Defence of the Revolutionary Armed Forces) set the requirements for candidates. Raúl Castro Ruz, brother of Fidel Castro and minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINRAR), oversaw the process of selection and training of the young candidates.²² The Cosmic Flight Coordinating Commission directed preparatory work relating to the flight of the first Cuban cosmonaut, with José Altshuler, a renowned scientist, appointed as its chairman.²³ Altogether, the set of institutions and individuals involved in the selection process of the nations' future representative in Interkosmos gave the quest for space in Cuba a hybrid political, military, scientific and technological character.

By 1980, Interkosmos had hosted six other guest cosmonauts, one of whom was East German Sigmund Jähn. The principle of inclusiveness operated by Interkosmos accounts for the series of 'firsts' in Soviet space programmes: in addition to sending the first woman into space (Valentina Tereshkova in 1963), they sent the first Asian (Vietnamese Pham Tuan in 1980). Although there is only scant documentary proof to back the speculation that Tamayo filled a racial quota for Interkosmos, it is plausible that Tamayo's selection was part of a joint Cuban and Soviet propagandistic strategy used against the USA in the cosmic scenario of the Cold War.²⁴

an overview see Piero Gleijeses, 'Cuba and the Cold War, 1959–1980', in Melvin Leffler and Odd Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 2: *Crises and Détente*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 327–48.

²⁰ Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

²¹ 'Divulgan logotipo relativo al vuelo especial conjunto soviético-cubano', *Granma*, 17 August 1980, p. 8.

²² Arnaldo Tamayo, *Un Cubano en el Cosmos*, Havana: Verde Olivo, 2013.

²³ Altshuler formed part of the space-oriented scientific community in Cuba, which had begun to cooperate with the Soviet Union and East European countries since the inception of Interkosmos on projects related to space physics, satellite communications meteorology, and medicine. He had combined experience in higher education (having been vice rector of the University of Havana) and technoscientific and diplomatic space expertise, since he had been both the vice president of the National Commission of Intercosmos (1966–73) and the president of the National Commission for Outer Space (1967–82). On the scientific links between Cuba and the USSR see Angelo Baracca, Víctor Fajer and Víctor Bruno Henríquez, 'The development of physics in Cuba during the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century: an integrated approach', in Angelo Baracca, Jürgen Renn and Helge Wendt (eds.), *History of the Development of Physics in Cuba*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2014. On Altshuler see *Directory of Officials of the Republic of Cuba*, Washington, DC: National Foreign Assessment Center, 1981.

²⁴ Although Latin America was a region of the lowest priority throughout the history of Soviet foreign policy, it was appealing to the USSR for their 'homemade socialism': the first communist party outside Russia was founded in Mexico, Cuba held the first social revolution that took place without the interference of the USSR, and Chile voted the first Marxist into the country's presidency. On Soviet internationalist policies towards Latin America during the post-Stalin years see Tobias Rupprecht, *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

The persona of Arnaldo Tamayo was crafted both by Moscow and by Havana in preparation for his spaceflight. The many encounters with the Cuban and Soviet media in 1980 once he had moved to Star City were, according to Tamayo, 'preparatory work for the propaganda campaign that would take place during the joint spaceflight'.²⁵ Instruction in Star City included not only physical training, astronomy, mathematics, physics and familiarization with IBM machines, but also how to operate and act before photographic, television and cinema cameras.²⁶ Figure 2 (c. 1980) shows Tamayo holding and aiming a professional film camera in the training facilities; other images from the Star City days show Tamayo wearing a headset and holding what appears to be a microphone in his right hand facing a camera held by Hungarian cosmonaut candidate Bertalan Farkach. The photographs that display the training for propaganda show the importance given at the Gagarin Training Centre to image-making across different types of audiovisual media. They demonstrate that cosmonaut candidates were trained by the Soviets both to self-fashion their image (before the camera) and to craft those of their fellow cosmonauts (behind the camera). Finally, they show the extent to which the Cosmonaut Training Centre shaped the public image of Interkosmos trainees to make them 'living symbols' of the advancement of communism through spaceflight.²⁷

Film would prove to be a useful vehicle to package Tamayo through both sight and sound for audiences around the world. His preparation in Star City for his flight aboard Soyuz 38, the actual spaceflight and his return to Earth were captured in different film productions: two Cuban, one Soviet. *Hermanados en la hazaña* (1980, roughly translated as *Brothered in Achievement*) and *El primero* were both directed by Cuban film-maker Eduardo de la Torre Rodríguez and produced by Estudios Cinematográficos y de Televisión de las FAR (Film and Television Studio of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, ECTV-FAR), which usually produced films with military themes such as interviews with veterans of the Cuban Revolution or military manoeuvres of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias or the Milicias de Tropas Territoriales.²⁸ This process was also the subject of the Soviet documentary, *На Одной Орбите* (roughly translated as *On a Single Orbit*, 1980).²⁹ In these documentaries, the cosmonauts were portrayed as skilful men of action, training underwater and in a centrifuge, handling the instruments aboard Soyuz 38, and jointly working aboard Salyut 6.

In this context, Tamayo's carefully constructed persona served to reinforce the Cuban Revolution's narrative of resilience and progress, providing a much-needed symbol of hope and unity at a time when the regime faced significant internal and external challenges.

Tamayo: symbol of the Cuban Revolution in the cosmos

The Joint Cuban–Soviet mission launched on 18 September 1980, and concluded on 26 September, arriving at a crucial moment for Cuba. The leaders of the Cuban Revolutionary government seized the opportunity of space exploration to enhance its scientific and technological standing during a turbulent era: first, Cuba's ambition to establish an independent

²⁵ Tamayo, op. cit. (22), p. 150. This and subsequent translations are mine.

²⁶ Tamayo, op. cit. (22), p. 121.

²⁷ Gerovitch, op. cit. (11), p. 135; Hall, Shayler and Vis, op. cit. (14).

²⁸ *Enciclopedia Digital del Audiovisual Cubano*, 'El primero (1981)', ENDAC, 2021.

²⁹ *Enciclopedia Digital del Audiovisual Cubano*, op. cit. (28). Footage from *El primero* is shown in Cuba Hoy, Un Cubano en el cosmos, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKitRuvUVHA (accessed 13 March 2023). Igor Bessarabov, *На Одной Орбите*, Moscow: Central Studio, 1980, at www.net-film.ru/film-8445 (accessed 14 March 2023). Although no documentary references to screenings of the films have been found (which would give an insight to the film's audiences), *Hermanados en la hazaña* won the 13 de Marzo contest of the University of Havana in 1981, which suggests that the film might have circulated amongst the urban academic community and been shown in public spaces such as centres of higher education.



Figure 2. Arnaldo Tamayo holds a professional film camera in the cosmonaut training facilities at Star City, c.1980. Arnaldo Tamayo, *Un Cubano En El Cosmos*, Havana: Editorial Verde Olivo, 2013, p. 122.

foreign policy and position itself as a key player in the Third World was hindered by Cuba's reliance on Soviet support, which had been solidified during earlier industrialization efforts.³⁰ In 1979, Cuba had hosted the sixth Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which presented an opportunity for the island to emerge as a leader in the movement. In his inaugural speech, Castro depicted Cuba as a selfless anti-imperialist fighter, despite its close ties to the USSR.³¹ The following year, Cuba's international standing faced a setback when it failed to support a United Nations resolution condemning the USSR's invasion of non-aligned Afghanistan in January 1980.³² Further international complications arose when the internal social unrest in Cuba manifested in the Mariel Boatlift of April 1980, during which approximately 125,000 Cubans emigrated to the United States, which represented a significant blow to the image of the Cuban Revolution both within Cuba and beyond its aquatic

³⁰ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, op. cit. (17), p. 3.

³¹ However, Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito, a founding figure of the non-aligned movement, criticized Cuba's alignment with the Soviets and questioned Castro's vision, leading to a significant division among summit participants. Jovan Cavoški, *Non-Aligned Movement Summits: A History*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022.

³² Amin Saikal, 'Islamism, the Iranian revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan', in Odd Arne Westad and Melvyn P. Leffler (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 3: *Endings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 112–34.

borders.³³ As the following section will explain, they were received with a largely hostile reception, mainly due to distorted press accounts about their supposed criminal pasts.

In the midst of internal and international political turmoil, the rise of a cosmonaut provided a much-needed boost in positive publicity for Cuba. Upon Tamayo and Romanenko's return to Earth, they were decorated as heroes of both the USSR and Cuba. The media played a crucial role in shaping Tamayo's narrative, portraying him as a devoted revolutionary and a representative of the Cuban people. His background as an Afro-Cuban fighter pilot from Guantánamo was highlighted, showcasing his remarkable journey from humble beginnings to national hero. Regime-operated publications like *Bohemia* and *Granma* emphasized his participation in aerial missions during the 1962 missile crisis and his service in Vietnam in 1967, framing him as a military figure who fought alongside nations united against US imperialism.³⁴ Here, Tamayo's story was intricately woven into the fabric of post-revolutionary Cuba's national and international history, reinforcing the idea that his achievements in space were a reflection of the country's resilience and aspirations.

Upon Tamayo and Romanenko's triumphant return to Havana on 10 October 1980, Raúl Castro, the minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, tied Cuban military and revolutionary values even more tightly together into the cosmonaut's persona. Speaking to an audience composed of the army and navy, Castro expressed pride that a Cuban, and a member of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, was the first Latin American in space. He stated that Tamayo had now added the title of 'first Cuban to wave the undefeated flag of the first State of workers and peasants in the Western Hemisphere in the cosmos' to his outstanding military career.³⁵ Castro emphasized that only in a just and humane socialist system could a citizen from the 'exploited social strata' be elevated to the 'infinite cosmic heights'. Here, space prompted the discussion of class on the grounds of revolution; his speech referenced the socialist character that the Cuban Revolution had taken since 1961 and which had been crystallized in the 1976 Constitution, suggesting that spaceflight would only have been achievable for rich Cubans in the pre-revolutionary Cuban regime.³⁶

Fidel Castro solidified Tamayo's image as a committed revolutionary and communist in his speech on 15 October 1980, celebrating the joint Cuban–Soviet flight. Castro stated that exceptional conditions were required for this space mission: character, capacity, valour, serenity, a revolutionary attitude and high moral standards. He believed that it required 'being a communist' to embody these traits.³⁷ Castro's statement echoed Nikita Khrushchev's 1962 assertion that cosmonauts were heroes who embodied the traits of communist society: 'high intellectual culture, moral purity, and perfect physique'.³⁸ Cosmonauts were deemed the highest representatives of communist societies, perfect in both body and mind, with a heightened sense of public duty. Notably, Castro's statement also celebrated Tamayo's racial heritage. Mentioning this was exceptional: both printed

³³ Rafael Rojas, *La vanguardia Peregrina: El Escritor Cubano, la Tradición y el Exilio*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2013; Kathleen Dupes Hawk, Ron Villella, Adolfo Leyva de Varona and Kristen Cifer, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980: The First Twenty Days*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014.

³⁴ 'Semblanza del primer astronauta cubano', *Granma*, 28 September 1980, p. 3. Cuba arrived at a definitive policy of support for Vietnamese communists in 1967, the year the Cuban leadership dubbed 'Year of Heroic Vietnam' in support of their struggle against imperialism. See Lajpat Rai, 'Vietnam and the "Third Communist Front"', *Economic and Political Weekly* (23 September 1972) 7(39), pp. 1975–84.

³⁵ 'Allocución del general de ejército Raúl Castro Ruz, ministro de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, con motivo del vuelo espacial conjunto soviético-cubano', *Granma*, 28 September 1980, p. 2.

³⁶ Rojas, op. cit. (16).

³⁷ Fidel Castro, 'Discurso pronunciado por Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente de la República de Cuba, en el Acto Central por el Primer Vuelo Conjunto Soviético-Cubano al cosmos', 15 October 1980, *Discursos e intervenciones del Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente del Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba*, at www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1980/esp/151080e.html (accessed 6 March 2022).

³⁸ Khrushchev cited in Gerovitch, op. cit. (11), p. 131.

and audiovisual media habitually omitted the fact that Tamayo was Black in their coverage of his career. I will return to this point in the next section, which covers the category of race in more detail.

Cuban and Soviet media presented the contrast between Tamayo's status as a cosmic hero and his identity as a humble, loving family man from provincial Cuba. Despite the extraordinary nature of his spaceflight, Cuban leadership portrayed Tamayo as an everyman, sharing the same qualities as any other citizen on the island. On 20 September 1980, the Soviet *Pravda* featured him on its front cover, again highlighting his roots in a working-class family from the small province of Guantánamo.³⁹ The Cuban magazine *Bohemia* published an extensive issue on the joint Cuban–Soviet flight, including a heartfelt article about Tamayo's adoptive parents, Rafael Tamayo and Esperanza Méndez. They were depicted as humble, hard-working Cubans, embodying 'the roots of the simplicity and modesty that characterize the Cuban Gagarin'.⁴⁰ This statement closely mirrors the German sentiment of 'Our Gagarin is Jähn'.⁴¹ In these instances of cosmonautic metonym, Gagarin symbolizes all cosmonauts, and all cosmonauts, in turn, represent Gagarin. This emphasis on the everydayness of the so-called 'Cuban Gagarin' was likely a propaganda strategy designed such that everyone in Cuba, even from the pre-revolutionary exploited classes, could achieve amazing feats.

Tamayo was further linked to Cuban popular culture through an official welcome tour through the island in 1980. He was greeted in Guantánamo by a large group of schoolchildren and by young dancers and musicians who performed in traditional attire with the Interkosmos logo as a backdrop.⁴² Footage captured Tamayo hugging a group of schoolchildren dressed in spacesuits that resembled those worn by the Interkosmos voyagers. This suggests that Tamayo's spaceflight resonated not only with adult audiences but also with younger generations, who saw him as an approachable hero. The reception blended themes of space exploration with elements of Cuban tradition, such as music and dance, creating a vibrant fusion of cutting-edge technoscience and deeply rooted Caribbean celebratory practices. By incorporating these cultural motifs, the event helped to humanize Tamayo among Cubans by Cubanizing understandings of cosmonauts around the world.

The *Intercosmos* record exemplifies how traditional and popular Cuban music was intricately woven into Arnaldo Tamayo's persona, while also showcasing how Cuban artists shaped local perceptions of outer space.⁴³ Released in 1980 by the Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales, Cuba's government-managed record label, this album served as the original score for the aforementioned documentary *Hermanados en la hazaña*.⁴⁴ The record featured contributions from renowned troubadour Silvio Rodríguez, who performed 'En el jardín de la noche' (In the garden of the night). The lyrics poetically describe Tamayo's flight into the cosmos, referencing themes of soaring into 'the sky garden on a violent bird ... on a horse of fire', clearly referencing Tamayo's spaceflight aboard Soyuz. Another track, 'Camino al Porvenir' (Road to the future) by Los Latinos, features a *guaguancó* rhythm paired with lyrics praising the USSR, such as 'we are internationalists' and 'with our revolution, we are on the way to progress; we will maintain the Soviet–Cuban friendship and

³⁹ 'Двое с разных полушарий' (Two from different hemispheres), *Pravda*, 20 September 1980, p. 3.

⁴⁰ 'Los padres', *Bohemia* (26 September 1980) 72(39), p. 44.

⁴¹ Siebeneichner, op. cit. (5).

⁴² Bessarabov, op. cit. (29).

⁴³ The Spanish spelling of *Intercosmos* (as opposed to the English *Interkosmos*) is kept whenever it appears as a proper name in Spanish-language sources.

⁴⁴ Cuban Ministry of Culture, *Bibliografía Cubana II*, 4th section, Materiales especiales, Havana: Consejo Nacional de Cultura, 1980.



Figure 3. Arnaldo Tamayo and Yuri Romanenko aboard Soyuz 38 in a series of artistic depictions featured on Soviet postage stamps. Source: Author's collection.

the solidarity of our brothered peoples', connecting technoscientific progress with revolutionary internationalism, and portraying Cubans and Soviets as brothers – that is, on the same footing.⁴⁵

The *Intercosmos* record creatively presented cosmic themes through the lens of Cuban *nueva trova*, which typically combined flamenco-style guitar strumming with popular or politically charged lyrics, and *guaguancó*, characterized by urban, Afro-Cuban themes accompanied by tall, narrow drums like *tumbadoras* or congas.⁴⁶ This musical fusion aurally demonstrated the vibrant rhythms of Cuban astroculture, merging Afro-Cuban and Latin Caribbean beats with cosmic ideals of internationalism, revolution and freedom – particularly in relation to the Soviet-led programme for which Tamayo was Cuba's representative.

In crafting Tamayo's persona alongside that of Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Romanenko, Moscow and Havana developed the imagery of a 'cosmic duo' (Figure 3): two members of a stellar comradeship that 'both advanced knowledge of the cosmos and promoted peace and brotherhood'.⁴⁷ Alongside Soyuz 38 commander Romanenko, Tamayo embodied a desired relationship between Cuba and the USSR through space technoscience. Presented to the Soviet public as an inseparable pair through a series of postal stamps, Tamayo and Romanenko symbolized Cuba's commitment to fully supporting the USSR in international matters during that period. This representation of Tamayo as the Caribbean face of Soviet–Cuban friendship extended into his later political career, when he was appointed president of the Cuba–Russia Parliamentary Group and the Cuban–Russian Friendship Association, founded in 1964.⁴⁸

In a departure from this narrative of a 'cosmic duo', the Cuban postal service issued a stamp in 1980 to commemorate the 'First Cuban–Soviet Spaceflight', featuring Tamayo alongside Yuri Gagarin instead of Romanenko. The stamp, adorned with the Cuban and Soviet flags, depicts Tamayo in his spacesuit, his gold visor lifted to reveal a serene expression. The western hemisphere is visible on the Earth's surface, with the Salyut 6 space station orbiting above. The choice to feature Gagarin rather than Tamayo's actual partner

⁴⁵ Los Latinos, 'Camino al porvenir', in various artists, *Intercosmos*, Havana: EGREM, 1980.

⁴⁶ For an academic overview of Cuban music see Maya Roy, *Músicas cubanas*, Madrid: Akal, 2003.

⁴⁷ Andrew Jenks, 'Transnational utopias, space exploration and the Association of Space Explorers, 1972–85', in Alexander C.T. Geppert (ed.), *Limiting Outer Space: Astroculture after Apollo*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018 (*European Astroculture*, vol. 2), pp. 209–35.

⁴⁸ Nuria Barbosa León, 'Cuba y Rusia: amistad legendaria', *Granma*, 9 May 2014.

in spaceflight likely aimed to reinforce the idea of Tamayo as the Cuban Gagarin, enhancing the narrative of cosmic brotherhood and unity that surrounded his flight. Ultimately, this portrayal strengthened the public perception of the bond between Cuba and the USSR, framing Tamayo's journey as a testament to their shared ideals and aspirations.

Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez's status as the first and only Latin American cosmonaut was a recurring trope in his presentation to Cuban and Soviet audiences. As the initial cosmonaut hailing from the vast, multi-ethnic and multicultural region of Latin America spanning 19,197,000 square kilometres, his achievement was no small feat. To this day, Tamayo remains one of only eight Latin Americans who have ventured into outer space, with seven others flying missions with NASA.

Latin Americanness was prominently featured in Tamayo's public portrayals through audiovisual and printed media, often drawing parallels to José Martí (1853–95), a revered Cuban poet, politician and national hero. Martí, known as the first anti-imperialist thinker of Latin America – whose importance in Cuban political culture should be emphasized – played a pivotal role in the Cuban War of Independence through his writings and active participation, cementing his status as a widely recognized figure across the region, from the Rio Grande to Patagonia.⁴⁹ By linking Tamayo's historic spaceflight to the legacy of José Martí, the Cuban government aimed to position Tamayo as a twentieth-century symbol of Latin American unity, independence and resistance against imperialism. This narrative resonated with audiences throughout the region, solidifying Tamayo's place in history as a trailblazer who represented the aspirations and struggles of Latin Americans on the global stage. Sigmund Jähn's post-spaceflight identification with a lineage of renowned German scientists and intellectuals, such as Alexander von Humboldt, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Carl Friedrich Gauss, mirrors the process by which Arnaldo Tamayo was celebrated as the embodiment of Cuban scientific and revolutionary ideals after his own cosmic voyage.⁵⁰

Symbols reflecting José Martí's vision of Latin Americanness, particularly its anti-imperialist stance, were included among the items that Tamayo took with him on his spaceflight aboard Soyuz 38. These items were later donated either to the renowned Museo de la Revolución in Havana or to the Municipal Museum of Guantánamo.⁵¹ The total weight of the objects could not exceed five kilograms, which meant that books carried much of the symbolic significance: the collection included a small bag of Cuban sugar, an effigy of Martí and another of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, and a copy of Martí's poem 'A los espacios' (To the spaces). Additionally, it featured two capsules filled with sand from Playa Girón, a book on Yuri Gagarin's visit to Cuba, a copy of Fidel Castro's *History Will Absolve Me*, and *El Cosmonauta* by the Afro-Cuban communist poet Nicolás Guillén. Carefully put together by representatives of the Department of Revolutionary Orientation and the Political Directorate of the Cuban Armed Forces, these objects were intended to be representative of Cuba and Latin America as geopolitical entities whose independent, revolutionary and anti-imperialist character was reinforced through spaceflight.⁵²

In 1980, Tamayo expressed his gratitude and pride in being elected to represent 'the great Latin American land', as José Martí called it.⁵³ With this statement, he positioned himself as the representative of a vast geographical region, advocating for Cuban hegemony throughout Latin America. Cuban media portrayed Tamayo presenting flowers and the Interkosmos flag at the base of the eighteen-metre-high statue of José Martí in Havana's Plaza de la

⁴⁹ Alfred J. López, *José Martí: A Revolutionary Life*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014.

⁵⁰ Siebeneichner, op. cit. (5).

⁵¹ Roberto Alvarez Quinones, 'Donan Tamayo y Romanenko al Museo de la Revolucion numerosos y valiosos objetos llevados al cosmos', *Granma*, 13 October 1980, pp. 1–2.

⁵² Tamayo, op. cit. (22).

⁵³ Bessarabov, op. cit. (29).

Revolución.⁵⁴ By linking the twentieth-century cosmonaut with the nineteenth-century revolutionary, Tamayo was crafted in flexible ways as a renewed symbol of Latin American unity, embodying anti-imperialism, Cuban independence and a revolutionary spirit.

While Tamayo-as-cosmonaut emphasized devotion to the Revolution, framed him as a symbol of Cuban-Soviet diplomacy within the framework of the narrative of the ‘cosmic duo’, and presented him as staunch anti-imperialist figure representing Latin America, this wouldn’t last, as debates about race in the United States unexpectedly drew him into a different astrocultural and sociopolitical sphere. Tamayo’s race, initially downplayed in the Soviet and Cuban settings, took centre stage during his interactions with audiences in the United States, a shift that not only highlights the complexities and malleability of technocelebrities’ identities in the context of the Cold War, but also reveals how Tamayo’s legacy evolved as he navigated different cultural landscapes.

Who went first: Tamayo or Bluford? Unpacking racial identity in space

Before the United States sent the first African American astronaut to space, Tamayo was primarily recognized as Cuban and Latin American, with his racial identity secondary to his national identity. To understand this initial downplaying of race in Arnaldo Tamayo’s persona by Cuban and Soviet authorities, it is essential to examine the broader historical context of race and the impact of the Cuban Revolution on Afro-descendants. Although the Revolution introduced egalitarian racial policies through a completely new legal framework, these measures were insufficient to eradicate the deep-seated prejudices stemming from centuries of slavery and colonization. From as early as 1959, communist Afro-Cuban intellectuals pressured the revolutionary government to implement anti-discrimination policies. Poet Nicolás Guillén – author of the aforementioned *El cosmonauta* – was among those advocating for ‘concrete steps to guarantee blacks’ access to all jobs, the armed forces, and state institutions, including the diplomatic service’.⁵⁵ This advocacy brought the issue of race to the attention of the revolutionary leadership, which responded by incorporating it into their political agenda, emphasizing that revolution and racism were incompatible. However, it is important to note that the socio-economic conditions of Black Cubans improved after the Revolution primarily due to their inclusion as a previously marginalized class rather than as an ethnic community.⁵⁶

Tamayo’s selection as the Cuban representative aboard Soyuz 38 aligned with the revolutionary leaders’ strategic use of race as a tool in Cuba’s foreign policy during the 1970s. Throughout this decade, the Cuban government actively embraced a Latin African identity to strengthen its presence on the international stage, particularly among Third World nations. During the 1970s, Cuba intervened in Angola’s civil war, seizing the opportunity to highlight its racial connections with many African countries as a justification for its support.⁵⁷ As Bayard explains, the emphasis on the ‘blackening’ of Cuban national identity allowed race to serve as a legitimizing element for the Angola mission, positioning Cuba as a leader among potential allies, including the Soviet Union.⁵⁸ Tamayo’s candidacy as a cosmonaut in the late 1970s was a clear reflection of this *negricación* of Cuban identity, reinforcing

⁵⁴ ‘Biografía del cosmonauta Arnaldo Tamayo’, *Bohemia* (26 September 1980) 72(39), p. 38.

⁵⁵ Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

⁵⁶ Velia Cecilia Bobes, ‘Cuba y la cuestión racial’, *Perfiles Latinoamericanos* (1996) 8, pp. 115–39.

⁵⁷ Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

⁵⁸ Lorraine Bayard de Volo, ‘Tactical *negricación* and white femininity: race, gender, and internationalism in Cuba’s Angolan mission’, *Radical History Review* (2020) 136, pp. 36–49.

the notion that Cuba was not only a revolutionary state but also a proud representative of its African heritage on the global stage.⁵⁹

Cuba's connections to Africa were closely tied to the concept of *mestizaje*, which refers to the historical blending of diverse racial and cultural populations in the Americas.⁶⁰ Fidel Castro asserted that Cubans were 'Latin Africans' to emphasize Cuba's Black ancestry and to position the nation as an independent player in international affairs. This diplomatic strategy, along with a commitment to internationalism, anti-colonialism and anti-racism, was crucial for legitimizing Cuba's interventions in Africa and asserting its leadership in the global power struggle.⁶¹ In a notable 1980 statement, Castro praised Arnaldo Tamayo as 'the first cosmonaut of Latin America and the first cosmonaut of Africa', noting that he, 'an eminently black man, who also carries in his blood that of the Indian and the Spanish, is a symbol of the mixed blood that in the crucible of the history of our country gave rise to our people'.⁶² Thus Tamayo was not only a representative of Latin America in space but also a figure who fit into the Latin African narrative promoted by Cuban revolutionary leaders in the decolonization struggles overseas.

Tamayo's identity as an Afro-Cuban infused the image of the cosmonaut with elements of the African diaspora, forging a connection between Black identity and space exploration. Romanian cosmonaut Dumitru Prunariu noted that Tamayo was the first Black person sent into space, which posed a political challenge for the Soviet Union at that time. Prunariu, who trained alongside Tamayo, acknowledged that his race likely influenced his selection for Soyuz 38, stating,

Both [Cuban] candidates were very well trained, very well prepared, but Tamayo was the first Black person to be sent into space. That was a political challenge for Russia ... for the Soviet Union in that time, to send him. He was well prepared, no doubt, but his Russian was pretty poor, compared to the other one [José López Falcón].⁶³

Clearly, Tamayo's role as a Black Cuban cosmonaut helped legitimize and strengthen Cuba's presence in outer space while also resonating with Black communities worldwide.

Tamayo was featured in magazines aimed at the African American community in the United States during the 1980s, publications which advocated for the right of Black individuals to travel into space. This issue gained significance in the evolving sociopolitical landscape of the US, where civil rights, women's and environmental movements began to challenge NASA, a predominantly male and white institution.⁶⁴ One notable publication, *Burning Spear*, described as 'the voice of the international black revolution' and published by the African People's Socialist Party in San Francisco, became a platform for discussing race and space. In October 1980, the magazine published a brief article about Tamayo and Romanenko's spaceflight titled 'Space flight promotes people's friendship'. The article highlighted that 'the flight by the African national from Cuba marks the seventh time a non-Soviet has ventured into space in the Soviet Union's Interkosmos program', showcasing the Soviet Union's commitment to internationalism.⁶⁵ The article also mentioned

⁵⁹ Bayard de Volo, op. cit. (58); Adrien Delmas, 'Cuba and Apartheid', in Anna Konieczna and Rob Skinner (eds.), *A Global History of Anti-apartheid: 'Forward to Freedom' in South Africa*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 133–50.

⁶⁰ Delmas, op. cit. (59), p. 142.

⁶¹ Bayard, op. cit. (58).

⁶² Castro, op. cit. (37).

⁶³ Burgess and Vis, op. cit. (12), p. 168.

⁶⁴ Kim McQuaid, 'Race, gender, and space exploration: a chapter in the social history of the Space Age', *Journal of American Studies* (2007) 41(2), pp. 405–34.

⁶⁵ 'Space flight promotes people's friendship', *Burning Spear* (1980) 7(8), p. 17.

a recent Vietnamese astronaut who participated in the same programme, which aimed to foster friendship among people of different nationalities. However, the term 'nationality' in this context does not refer to the cosmonaut's citizenship or belonging to a nation state; rather, it emphasizes racial characteristics that identify Tamayo as an African man. This framing made him an appealing representative for space-related issues within the socialist African American community in San Francisco.

The debate over race in space reignited when Guion Bluford, the first African American astronaut, travelled to space aboard the *Challenger* during the STS-8 mission in 1983. By this time, Arnaldo Tamayo had been appointed deputy to the National Assembly and president of the Sociedad Patriótica de Educación Patriótica-Militar (Patriotic Society for Patriotic–Military Education) within the Revolutionary Armed Forces. Since his own spaceflight, Tamayo had begun to establish a political reputation in Cuba, particularly in legislative and civic education.⁶⁶

Cathleen Lewis raises the possibility that Tamayo's selection as a candidate for the Interkosmos programme may have been a strategic response by the USSR to NASA's 1978 announcement of Bluford's recruitment, suggesting a desire to 'one-up' the United States.⁶⁷ NASA's introduction of the space shuttle in the early 1970s had increased academic requirements for candidates while lowering flight training standards, thereby expanding the applicant pool. However, it wasn't until 1985 that the US sent another astronaut of a different race into space, when Hawaiian Ellison S. Onizuka became the first Asian American in space. According to Lewis, Tamayo only became the first Black person in space three years after his flight, when journalists began to link his and Bluford's voyages.⁶⁸

The debate over who was the first Black person in space, encompassing issues of race, nationality, ancestry and political ideology, found its way into other widely circulated magazines targeting the African American community, such as *Ebony* and *Black Enterprise*. In 1985, *Ebony* was the most popular Black publication in the US, boasting an estimated readership of 8 million per month. Founded in 1945 by African American businessman John H. Johnson, *Ebony* aimed to showcase 'the happier side of Negro life', encouraging Black participation in consumer society and highlighting the achievements of the African American community.⁶⁹ *Black Enterprise*, created by businessman Earl Graves in 1970, focused on promoting Black entrepreneurship and economically empowering the Black community in America. Both magazines encouraged Black participation in American capitalism while steering clear of the more radical racial activism found in other publications.⁷⁰

In its February 1983 issue, *Black Enterprise* reported on 'Careers behind the launchpad', noting that Guion Bluford was 'just one of many blacks worldwide who have made breakthroughs in the aerospace industry'. The article highlighted that 'three years ago, a black Cuban, Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez, had the honour of being the first black astronaut in space when he spent 18 days aboard Soyuz 38'.⁷¹ Two years later, *Ebony* featured a letter from New York City reader Palmira N. Rios (now a researcher at the University of Puerto Rico) in

⁶⁶ Directorate of Intelligence, *Directory of Officials of the Republic of Cuba*, Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1983.

⁶⁷ Lewis, op. cit. (6).

⁶⁸ Lewis, op. cit. (6).

⁶⁹ E. James West, 'A hero to be remembered: *Ebony* magazine, critical memory and the "real meaning" of the King Holiday', *Journal of American Studies* (2018) 52(2), pp. 503–27.

⁷⁰ Quinn Conyers, 'The focus of "Black Enterprise" magazine after the civil rights movement', doctoral dissertation, Howard University, 2008.

⁷¹ 'Careers behind the launchpad', *Ebony*, February 1983, p. 59.

its October 1985 issue. Rios pointed out the significance of these achievements within the broader context of race and representation in space exploration in the following terms:

In your article 'The Future Makers' (Aug. 1985) it was incorrectly stated that Col. Guion S. Bluford 'made history by becoming the first Black astronaut in space'. Such honour, however, falls on a Black Cuban astronaut, Arnaldo Tamayo-Mendez, who was in space as part of the Soviet Interkosmos program between September 18 and 26 of 1980. Tamayo participated in the coupling of his spacecraft with the Soviet space laboratory Salyut 6, in which he later conducted several medical-biological and technical experiments.⁷²

Rios not only affirmed Tamayo's status as the first Black person in space but also highlighted his technological and scientific expertise, emphasizing his hands-on participation in the mission's programmes. In 1989, another *Ebony* reader, Tom Headly, responded to an article titled 'Why famous blacks died young', correcting the magazine in the following terms:

I noticed a factual error in the paragraph about astronaut Ronald McNair, who died on the space shuttle Challenger. You say that 'in 1984, he became the second Black to travel to outer space (after Lt. Col. Guion Bluford)'. In fact, Mr. McNair was the third Black to travel in space, not the second. In August of 1980 Arnaldo Tamayo Mendez, a Black Cuban astronaut, orbited the Earth with a Soviet astronaut. He was also the first Latin American ever to travel in space. Tamayo Mendez, by the way, is still alive.⁷³

Four years after Rios's letter brought attention to *Ebony* magazine's neglect of Tamayo's contributions, Headly reiterated this concern. He challenged the magazine for overlooking significant achievements of Black individuals in the socialist realm and emphasized the need to include Afro-Cubans within the magazine's more exclusive definition of belonging to the Black community.

The two magazines held contrasting views on who should be recognized as the first Black astronaut: *Black Enterprise* credited Tamayo, while *Ebony* awarded that title to Bluford on two occasions within four years. This discrepancy reveals differing perspectives on membership in the transnational Black community. Both publications, which were not sympathetic to the socialist system under which Tamayo achieved his feat, interpreted Black transnationality in relation to space differently. *Black Enterprise* recognized it as a crossing of the Cold War divide, while the more conservative *Ebony* focused solely on NASA's contributions.

This debate over transnational Black identity sparked by Tamayo's spaceflight should be understood within the tensions that emerged when exiled Afro-Cubans arriving in the United States in the 1980s – the aforementioned Mariel Boatlift – were faced with the static notions of 'race' and 'ethnicity' that operated in the country. A survey of immigration records revealed that approximately 30 per cent of Mariel arrivals identified as 'Black' or as the Spanish *mulato*, either by their own choice or as assigned by those filling in their forms.⁷⁴ Their unwelcoming reception was shaped by long-standing associations between Blackness and criminality in both Cuba and the United States, which led many in south Florida to regard most of the newcomers as criminals.⁷⁵ These racial categories developed by the state have historically obfuscated the intersections of Blackness and Latinidad; they

⁷² 'The future-makers', *Ebony*, October 1985, p. 20.

⁷³ 'Why famous Blacks died young', *Ebony*, April 1989, pp. 25–6, 25.

⁷⁴ Alexander Stephens, 'Making migrants "criminal": the Mariel Boatlift, Miami, and US immigration policy in the 1980s', *Anthurium* (2021) 17(2), pp. 1–18.

⁷⁵ Stephens, op. cit. (74).

did not operate in the same way in Cuba, where nationality has historically been brought to the forefront of identity.⁷⁶ Unlike their white co-nationals, migrant Afro-Cubans were forced to reshape their ethnic views of the self with the historically developed labels of ethnicity in the United States.

Rios and Headly's letters provide rare insight into how audiences shaped Tamayo's persona, sometimes in opposition to media portrayals.⁷⁷ Although these examples do not represent the broader African American community's views, they illustrate how Arnaldo Tamayo, recognized by readers as a Cuban, Latin American and communist spacefarer, transcended conventional Cold War boundaries. His persona was shaped not only by Cuban and Soviet propaganda but also by African American and Afro-Latin audiences in publications that were critical of socialism.

It is noteworthy that, for all the debate that Tamayo's race sparked in the USA, the same didn't occur in Cuba. Textbooks offer a glimpse into how schoolchildren in Cuba have historically learned about space, Tamayo and his place in the larger narrative of the nation's history of science and technology. In these textbooks, Tamayo's race isn't mentioned; rather, Latin Americanness seems to be the more important element of Tamayo's identity. His militancy is downplayed, whereas his status as a researcher is put at the forefront.

An example of this is the fifth-grade natural-sciences textbook, which aims to teach children about Earth, its cosmic environment and its components. Originally published in 1989, it has only been re-edited once. Tamayo appears early on in the book, in the section titled 'The solar system, a great family of stars'. The textbook states that 'in 1980 the first joint Cuban-Soviet flight was carried out, in this way, the research cosmonaut Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez became the first Latin American cosmonaut'.⁷⁸ In a junior-high history book, he is presented under the general headline of 'The development of the USSR until the end of the 1980s: achievements and difficulties'. The book presents a timeline of continuous Soviet spaceflight achievements that began with Yuri Gagarin, whose success was 'followed by others such as the launching of a space laboratory into orbit and joint flights with other countries, in which the Cuban Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez, the first cosmonaut of our country and of Latin America, participated'.⁷⁹ Yet another junior-high textbook that describes the 'Panorama of culture, science and education in Cuba since the triumph of the Revolution', notes that 'in 1980 Lieutenant Colonel Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez became the first Latin American cosmonaut, by participating in the joint Cuba-USSR flight, carrying out studies and experiments associated with various Cuban scientific projects'.⁸⁰ Race is absent in these historical narratives of space and spaceflight, suggesting that it wasn't considered a central element for national or Soviet audiences as it was for audiences in the USA.

But how did Tamayo himself understand the intersection between race and space in hindsight? In his 2013 autobiography, Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez reflected on how the intersection of race, revolution and space exploration shaped his life and career. He recognized

⁷⁶ Alan A. Aja, *Miami's Forgotten Cubans: Race, Racialization, and the Miami Afro-Cuban Experience*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

⁷⁷ Reminiscing about her letter to *Ebony*, Dr Palmira N. Rios notes, 'It was a historical error to ignore the deed of the Afro-Cuban astronaut and for this reason I wrote in great detail about his scientific contributions'. Personal correspondence via email, 2 March 2022.

⁷⁸ Silvia Carrasco, *Ciencias Naturales, Quinto Grado*, Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2016.

⁷⁹ Enrique Lama Gómez, 'El sistema socialista mundial desde 1945 hasta fines de la década de 1980 y las consecuencias de la vuelta al capitalismo en los países de Europa del Este y Rusia en la década de 1990', in Enrique Lama Gómez and Vivian Peraza Martell (eds.), *Temas de Historia Contemporánea*, Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2001, pp. 1–38.

⁸⁰ Susana Callejas et al., *Historia de Cuba, Nivel Medio Superior*, Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2011, p. 448.

that before the Cuban Revolution, becoming a fighter pilot was a path limited to children of the affluent classes, and that the selection process was discriminatory against certain groups:

Blacks and mulattoes, no way! Even in the table of medical conditions of the air force of tyranny [Fulgencio Batista's dictatorial regime], there was a medical category called 'repulsive ugliness'. It was applied to disapprove of blacks, the ugly, those who suffered from juvenile acne, the skinny, the big-nosed ... In short, the pilots had to be white, blond, attractive and of a wealthy class.⁸¹

In Tamayo's view, it would have been impossible in pre-revolutionary Cuba for him to train as a fighter pilot due to his race, something he was only able to achieve in post-revolutionary Cuba and the USSR, also shaped by revolution.

By becoming the first Cuban, Latin American and person of African descent to travel to space in 1980, Tamayo embodied the revolutionary ideals of equality and social mobility. His spaceflight suggested that the Revolution had created a society where individuals from humble backgrounds could achieve extraordinary success, regardless of their race or class. Tamayo's journey, from a poor family in Guantánamo to becoming a cosmonaut, was a powerful symbol of the Revolution's promise of a more just and equitable society. His accomplishments in space were celebrated as a testament to the transformative potential of the Cuban Revolution and its commitment to providing opportunities for all its citizens.

Previous sections have shown how Tamayo's persona was shaped according to the agenda of both Cuban and Soviet leadership and by international audiences through printed and audiovisual media. In the last section, I turn to the ongoing crafting of Tamayo's persona through different media – factual and fictionalized – in a post-Cold War world.

From Cold War icon to marginalized memory: the trials of Arnaldo Tamayo in a changing Cuba

In the 2018 novel *Círculos de Cal*, a fictionalized version of Arnaldo Tamayo appears in the story of a young historian, Julio Belladonna, who is researching Soviet contributions to science and technology during the Cold War. Belladonna visits an elderly Tamayo on 18 September, the anniversary of his 1980 spaceflight. He is invited to join Tamayo for a symbolic dinner reminiscent of the meals he had during his Soyuz flight: mashed potatoes and meat (initially canned beef, now chicken). A secondary character recounts that, initially, many people attended these gatherings: friends from the army, political figures and the municipal Party secretary with his family.⁸² However, for the past three years, only a physics professor from the university, an old friend of Tamayo's who monitored the spaceflight from Cuba, has been present. Now in his old age and largely forgotten by the political elite that once celebrated his achievements, the novelized Tamayo reflects sadly on his days in Star City with his guests. Although this portrayal is fictionalized, it captures how a new generation of Cuban writers, born after Tamayo's spaceflight, imagine him – an elderly, lonely figure, trapped in memories of his past as a cosmonaut.

In contrast to this fictional depiction and unlike all other technocelebrities discussed in this special issue, Tamayo remains engaged in crafting his public self through social media. However, the extent of his autonomy in this self-representation, especially compared to the scrutiny he faced from the Cuban leadership during his time in Star City,

⁸¹ Tamayo, op. cit. (22), p. 42.

⁸² Yonnier Torrez Rodríguez, *Círculos de Cal*, Maracaibo: Sultana del Lago Editoras, 2018.

remains unclear. Although Twitter's role as an outlet for free speech on the island has been contested, Tamayo has maintained two different accounts on the platform.⁸³ In his first, now-deleted, account, Tamayo described himself as 'the first Latin African cosmonaut. Hero of the Republic of Cuba and the Soviet Union. Deputy of the National Assembly of People's Power.'⁸⁴

Some Twitter accounts (whose owners have not been identified) accused him of being a capitalist or expressing their dislike for Raúl Castro, to which Tamayo responded in a sarcastic tone.⁸⁵ In other interactions, he was accused of being out of touch with Cuba's socio-economic realities, using space travel as a metaphor: 'You still haven't come back down from space, what interest does the government show if things in Cuba are only getting worse and the standard of living is more precarious every day?'⁸⁶ Here, being in space was a metaphor used to indicate a state of being disconnected from Cuba's realities; furthermore, outer space was equated with a realm of privilege. It remains unclear whether his departure from Twitter in 2020 was a personal choice or a response to pressure from the Cuban government after what many have characterized as the 'Twitter rant' in which he confronted critics of the Cuban regime. In either case, the interactions between Tamayo and his Twitter audience serve as a lens through which to observe how the legacies of Space Age technocelebrities are contested by platform users in the post-Cold War context.

In a newly created Twitter account (October 2022), Tamayo describes himself as 'Reserve Brigadier General, War pilot, first Cuban and Latin African cosmonaut. Flew on the Soyuz-38 spacecraft in September 1980 with Yuri Romanenko'.⁸⁷ He has dropped the accolades of Hero of Cuba and the Soviet Union, instead emphasizing his participation in the Soyuz 38 mission alongside Romanenko, thus underscoring the trope of the 'cosmic duo'. Nowadays, Tamayo's X feed commonly features multiple images of Fidel Castro and content with anti-imperialist, anti-NATO, anti-Organization of American States and anti-capitalist themes. As of February 2024, Tamayo has posted pro-Palestine and anti-Israel statements, demanding a halt to what he describes as genocide against Palestinians, while also denouncing the United States as an accomplice to Israeli violence.⁸⁸ This suggests that Tamayo is constructing an image of himself as a steadfast revolutionary, committed to anti-imperialist causes such as the Palestinian struggle, reminiscent of the roles he embodied for Cuban audiences in the early 1980s, particularly during times of US economic pressure.

In the post-Cold War era, Arnaldo Tamayo appears to have gained more agency in crafting his public persona. Although he has moved away from the 'hero' figure, he still positions himself close to Cuba's revolutionary political and military leadership. His status as a technocelebrity from another era is still being negotiated through the questioning whether the values represented by a Cold War space hero align with contemporary Cuban society, in

⁸³ Rafael de Jesús Cruz Ramos, 'Caracterización de la red de usuarios de Twitter en torno a la etiqueta # Cuba', *Serie Científica de la Universidad de las Ciencias Informáticas* (2022) (15)5, pp. 176–85.

⁸⁴ Snapshots of this deleted profile are available at https://web.archive.org/web/*/http://twitter.com/arnaldotamayo (accessed 5 August 2024).

⁸⁵ Tweet from Twitter user Kata0000, @Kata00001, 12 September 2019, at <https://twitter.com/Kata00001/status/1172358710292860928>.

⁸⁶ Tweet from user @Cubalib61950800, 13 September 2019, 12:22 a.m., at <https://twitter.com/Cubalib61950800/status/1172379894279311360>, accessed 4 August 2024.

⁸⁷ Twitter profile for Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez, @tamayo_arnaldo, at https://twitter.com/tamayo_arnaldo (accessed 19 December 2022).

⁸⁸ Tweet by X user @tamayo_arnaldo, 13 February 2024, at https://x.com/tamayo_arnaldo/status/1757506261497573553 (accessed 25 August 2024).

which national space heroes seem to no longer hold the same significance. As Tamayo navigates the complexities of his identity in the post-Cold War landscape, he reflects not only on his historical significance but also on the broader implications of his narrative within contemporary Cuban society.

This article has shown the multifaceted persona construction of Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez, his crafting as a standard-bearer for racial progressivism in Cuba and the broader Soviet-aligned world, the transnational character of his evolving identity, and the way Space Age personae can continue the renegotiation of their identity in a post-Cold War world. While the initial crafting of Tamayo's persona mirrored the archetype of Soviet cosmonauts, particularly Yuri Gagarin, it also incorporated elements of Cuban culture, such as poetry, music and dance, which infused his narrative with a distinctly Cuban flavour. Over time, his persona evolved to embody a complex array of symbols reflecting significant political, military and sociocultural experiences pertinent to both Cuba and the broader region. These symbols included the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban youth corps and the overall relationship with the Soviet Union. Amidst a sociopolitical crisis characterized by mass emigration of dissident Cubans to the United States, Tamayo emerged as a vital spokesperson for revolutionary loyalty and for socialist feasibility.

In a second moment of persona crafting, the racialized dimension of Tamayo emerged in 1983, when the international discourse on race – bridging the geopolitical divide of the Cold War through social critique – began to shape Tamayo's public image. He resonated with African American and Afro-Latino audiences in the United States who were attuned to the geopolitical dynamics of the Caribbean and Latin America. Finally, in the post-Cold War landscape, Tamayo's ongoing renegotiation of his identity is evident, particularly through his presence on social media. He is redefining his image, moving away from his hero status to emphasize his political, military and diplomatic background. Thus Tamayo's space persona has evolved into a niche platform for discussing Cuba's social and economic challenges, addressing privilege within a socialist framework, and voicing criticisms of the regime.

The study of Arnaldo Tamayo's persona serves as a lens onto Cuban astroculture, which resonates with Ibero-American musical traditions, Caribbean aesthetics and revolutionary, socialist and anti-imperialist ideals. This astroculture was crafted, disseminated and consumed through rich narratives and artefacts that referenced the often contradictory values of Cuban–Soviet relations, Third World solidarity, non-alignment and the anti-imperialist principles of José Martí. Tamayo offers a glimpse of an astroculture intimate with both the Soviet and Western blocs, but reducible to neither of them.

While other studies of space celebrities highlight their strong connections to national, ethnic and political ideals, Tamayo's persona is intricately linked to Cuba's interstitial position during the final years of the Cold War. Both an ordinary individual and an extraordinary cosmonaut, Tamayo embodies the complexities of socialism. Through Tamayo, the historical alliance between the USSR and a nation in the western hemisphere can be critically examined. His persona serves as a lens to explore the tension between Cuban nationalism – rooted in independence and anti-imperialism – and the country's subservience to Soviet interests, complicating narratives of autonomy necessary for confronting the United States. As an Afro-descendant, Tamayo also invites reflections on the transnational complexities of race, particularly as his image circulated in the United States. In this context, Tamayo – an Afro-Cuban, Spanish-speaking socialist from Latin America – was simultaneously embraced and marginalized by the broader global Black community. These ambiguities in Tamayo's persona illustrate how geopolitical and social changes ultimately served as tools for sustaining his prominence and notoriety.

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