

## **Leopoldina Rodríguez: Hemingway's Cuban Lover?**

**Andrew Feldman, Hemingway  
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PERHAPS because of limited access to Cuban sources caused by strained U.S.-Cuban relations, or the difficulty of obtaining certain key interviews in English, none of Hemingway's important American biographers — Michael Reynolds, Kenneth Lynn, Jeffrey Meyers, or James Mellow — nor yet Hillary Hemingway and Carlene Brennen, authors of the recently published *Hemingway in Cuba* — mentions Leopoldina Rodríguez. Carlos Baker is the sole exception. Cuban and Russian biographers, on the other hand, have explored the topic in depth. Interviews with Leopoldina's niece Ilse Bulit, translations of interviews from Spanish-language sources, and analysis of Cuban scholarship and original documents at the Finca Vigía Museum reveal that Leopoldina Rodríguez was not only Hemingway's long-time friend, confidante — and, in all likelihood, his lover — but also an important influence in his life and on *Islands in the Stream* and even *The Old Man and the Sea*. [End Page 62]

Hemingway's literary portrayal of 'Lil', the olive-skinned mulatta in *Islands in the Stream* who had frequented the Floridita for over twenty-five years, strongly resembles his real-life relationship with 'Leo', or Leopoldina Rodríguez — described in interviews with Hemingway's close Cuban friends, such as journalist Fernando G. Campoamor, writer Enrique Serpa, doctor José Luis Herrera Sotolongo, accountant Roberto Herrera Sotolongo, and Majordomo René Villarreal (cited in Páporov, Fuentes, and Mariño Rodríguez). Leopoldina's niece, Ilse Bulit, who lived with her aunt in an apartment that Hemingway rented for them in the 1940s and 1950s, has also documented the relationship and its similarity to the one described in *Islands in the Stream*. Both in her series of articles published in the Cuban press and my own recent interview with her, Bulit describes her memories of this relationship in vivid detail.

In *Islands in the Stream*, Hemingway wrote that Lil would make 'her stately progress to the far end of the bar, speaking to many of the men she passed and smiling at others.' She had 'a beautiful smile and wonderful dark eyes and lovely black hair.' Floridita regulars 'treated her with respect' because 'nearly everyone she spoke to had loved her at some time in the last twenty-five years.' They called her 'Honest Lil' for her aversion to unkind words and obscene actions (177–178).

Lil is same age as Thomas Hudson, whose attentive gestures and loving descriptions show his enduring fondness for her. When Lil's hair turns grey at the roots, Hudson buys her hair dye: 'When it would begin to show white at the roots along the line of her forehead and along the line of the part, she would ask Thomas Hudson for money to have it fixed and when she came back from having it dyed, it was glossy and natural-looking and lovely as a young girl's hair.' Hudson bought the coat Lil wears and adores, which causes her to declare with pride that she could have sold it a 'half dozen times', but would not have dreamed of doing so (IIS 179). One of Lil's most prominent features is

her skin, 'smooth as olive-colored ivory, if there were olive-colored ivory, with slightly smoky roselike cast.' The color impresses Thomas Hudson and reminds him of well-seasoned mahagua (a typically Cuban wood) when freshly cut, sanded smooth, and waxed lightly. Nowhere else has Hudson ever seen 'that smoking and almost greenish color' (177). He also marvels that Lil's skin is 'as smooth as a Chinese girl's' (177).

In interviews conducted during the 1970s, Hemingway's friends (and Floridita regulars) Enrique Serpa, Fernando G. Campoamor, Antonio Meilán, [End Page 63] José Luis and Roberto Herrera Sotolongo, and Majordomo René Villarreal remember Leopoldina Rodriguez as a regular presence at the Floridita bar and in Hemingway's life (see Fuentes 236 and Páporov 56, 138). They remember 'Leo' as having had the same ivory-smooth, olive-colored skin, the same black hair, the same ship-like body, and the same aversion to unkind words and actions as the 'Honest Lil' Hemingway described in *Islands in the Stream*. For this reason, they often called her 'Leopoldina la Honesta' (Fuentes 236, Páporov 56). Cuban biographer Norberto Fuentes also reports that those who frequented the Floridita remember Leopoldina as a 'very elegant, refined, well-educated mulatto' who started going to the bar when 'the walls of the place were made of marble' (236). The Floridita's marble walls date such memories to before the 1930s, and correspond with Hemingway's description in *Islands in the Stream* of Leo's having frequented the bar for more than 25 years (Campoamor 19, IIS 190). In interviews with Fuentes, Floridita habitués describe Leopoldina as being at the bar 'practically all the time.' Enrique Serpa, who was a frequent patron of the Floridita, describes Leopoldina as a woman of medium height, with African and Asian features, but light skin, still in her forties: 'Her face always well presented, sensual lips — it was difficult to take one's eyes off of her — a well sculpted nose, eyes that caressed, filled you with goodness. She was always dressed elegantly and in good taste' (quoted in Páporov 56).

Leopoldina often spoke with Hemingway alone for long hours at the Floridita or read his cards there, but their relationship was not limited to the bar. According to Campoamor, she frequently accompanied Hemingway to sports clubs, stadiums, and boxing rings, as on the occasion when they went to see their mutual friend Kid Tunero fight against Joe Légon, a Havana favorite (cited in Mariño Rodríguez 74). Cuban researcher Osmar Mariño Rodríguez interviewed Campoamor on several occasions between 1993 and Campoamor's death in 2001. During one interview, Campoamor took out a picture from his personal collection where Hemingway appeared with Leopoldina and explained:

*This was taken at the Tropical during a baseball game between Almendares and Havana. Then we went to the Floridita and to the Donoban to see a few friends. Sometimes, we visited the Avenue along the Port, and the rougher neighborhoods that were nearby since Hemingway often sought out the company of simple, noble people. We always had a hell of a good time on these outings. We [End Page 64] went to see cockfights, to the Montmartre Casino, to Sloppy Joe's, to the Plaza Hotel, to the Sevilla Hotel, to the Sans Souci Casino, and other places around town.'*

(Cited in Mariño Rodríguez, *La Habana de Hemingway y Campoamor* 75; see also Páporov 55)

Campoamor and Meilán both describe Leopoldina as poor, a ‘prostitute through need’, whom Ernest would often invite either to accompany him on the town or back to his home. Apparently he also gave her gifts, for ‘sentimental reasons’ (Fuentes 236–237). In an interview with Páporov, Serpa affirms that Leopoldina was ‘one of the easy, attractive luxury women in Havana’ at the end of the 1930s and 1940s, who suddenly lacked the means of earning a living another way (55). Serpa acknowledges that in order to support herself and her son, she was known to accept money from the rich and powerful men of Havana who frequented the Floridita. But he also underlines that it would have been difficult to find another woman with ‘such a pure and tender spirit as Leopoldina’ (quoted in Páporov 56). Hemingway and Leopoldina were kindred spirits, Serpa emphasizes, who had both been unlucky in love, found each other, and formed a pact that gave them reciprocal comfort, affection, and loyalty. It would be misleading to reduce their lasting friendship to a business transaction:

*Leopoldina could never attain happiness, but more than with any other, with Hemingway she had known friendship, a comforting, tender, and attentive, and often paternal relationship. She was the only woman allowed to enter the Floridita without an escort, and this small privilege she owed to her friendship with Hemingway.*

*(Serpa quoted in Páporov 56)*

Leopoldina’s niece, Cuban journalist Ilse Bulit, confirms the duration and depth of their relationship. Bulit reports that Hemingway visited her aunt regularly, gave Leo a regular allowance, and for more than a decade paid the rent of her apartment in the Astral building on Old Havana’s Calle Infanta (SEMLac Partes I, II). Born in 1941, Bulit remembers Hemingway’s constant presence during her childhood spent in her aunt’s apartment throughout the 1940s and 1950s:

Leopoldina, a fine-featured, dark-skinned young lady, became Hemingway’s lover for many years. The truth is that he never left [End Page 65] her for another woman. Hemingway loved Leopoldina, held her very dear to his heart. He paid for her apartment on Calle Infanta and never abandoned her financially even during her long and painful cancer, which eventually took her life.

(Bohemia 13).

Bulit also confirms that just as Thomas Hudson gives regalos cariñosos [affectionate gifts] to Honest Lil in *Islands in the Stream*, so Hemingway gave Leopoldina frequent gifts, such as money for her niece’s school supplies.

Hemingway took his fourth wife Mary to lunch with his ‘long-time occasional girlfriend’ Leopoldina at the Floridita restaurant. An anecdote from Mary’s memoirs establishes that Hemingway and Leopoldina’s ‘intimate friendship’ began before Mary’s 1945 arrival in Cuba:

*Leopoldina claimed that she was a descendant of Maximilian, the Emperor of Mexico, eighty years before, and she had the lovely green-tinted skin of Latins and the large lugubrious dark eyes of the offspring of deposed or murdered potentates. I found her conversation less alluring than her looks. Having seated us, Ernest drifted back to the bar and Leopoldina said, ‘You can’t appreciate what a wonderful man he is. Simpático y generoso.’*

*‘No, but I’ll try.’*

*‘Everybody loves him. Todo el mundo.’*

*‘That’s a lot of people.’*

*‘Everybody hopes you will be good and sweet to him. Everybody.’*

*‘That’s nice of them.’ I was learning that Spanish-speaking people love to repeat words for emphasis. I didn’t know the word for ‘solicitous.’*

*‘Do you enjoy living in Havana?’*

*‘No. It’s an evil city. Depravada.’*

*‘What a shame. I haven’t yet seen that.’*

*‘It’s evil, and it’s too hot,’ Leopoldina declared.*

*‘But not as hot as Paris.’*

*‘No. Not as hot as Paris,’ she agreed. Then she glowered at me, suspicion in her lovely eyes, and told me that her liver was bothering her.*

*(How It Was 178) [End Page 66]*

Leopoldina Rodríguez was neither a Floridita barfly nor Hemingway’s would-be mistress, but a complex woman with her own history, experiences, and desires. Her mother was a maid to a powerful and prosperous Havana family, the Pedrosos, who lived near the Plaza de la Catedral, so Leopoldina enjoyed an education unavailable for most Cubans at that time. Bulit affirms, ‘Like my grandmother María Ignacia, she knew how to use the cutlery, serve wine for meat or fish, and carry some books on the head at home to show good posture in public’ (SEMLac Parte IV). Throughout her life, these advantages were useful to Leopoldina in attracting cultured, financially secure men of influence. Hemingway was but one of these men.

As a young woman in Cuba at the turn of the 20th century, Leopoldina attempted to build a life for herself using the means available to her. At that time, one opportunity for a mixed-race woman graced with beauty was to ‘try her luck’ with a wealthy man of good standing, preferably a Spaniard or a Chinaman (Bulit, SEMLac Parte IV). As fate would have it, she became involved with a Cuban of Spanish descent, Alberto Barraqué, who would father her only son, Alberto, Jr. But perhaps because of her race, Leopoldina’s lover never legitimized their relationship with a marriage proposal (Bulit, SEMLac Parte IV). He did, however, invite her to accompany him to Europe.<sup>1</sup> Although Alberto and Leopoldina had their differences and separated there, Leopoldina did not retreat back to her native land. Instead, she became the mistress to the famed Falangist leader José Antonio Primo de Rivera, executed by Franco in 1936 as a traitor to the Spanish Republic (SL 679; Bulit interview with the author). José Antonio

provided Leopoldina with the means to return to Havana and open her own dress boutique, although this business, attempted during the tough economic times of the Great Depression, would later fail (Bulit interview with the author). It was in this context that Leopoldina began to frequent the Floridita.

Carlos Baker attributes Leopoldina's significance in Hemingway's life to the writer's attempts to 'keep up his bad-boy reputation' while Mary was away, but this seems rather unfair (603). Although Baker reports Hemingway's uncommon 'euphoria'<sup>2</sup> in 1949 when helping Roberto Herrera purchase a gift for Leopoldina's birthday, Hemingway's renowned biographer fails to observe that it was the year when the two old friends would be turning fifty together (592). A closer reading of one of Hemingway's 1949 letters to Charles Scribner reveals Hemingway's fondness for Leopoldina and his excitement about her birthday: [End Page 67]

*This noon I go into town to see the oldest and best whore I ever knew. She is the same age I am and I knew her when she was a kid, when she [was] the mistress of Primo de Rivera's boy<sup>3</sup> that started Fascism in Spain (good boy but mis-led in his head), and we will tell sad stories of the death of Kings and get the local gossip. She tells me everything about everybody and gives me all the handkerchiefs her boyfriends leave. Have initialed handkerchiefs from every sugar king in the Island.*

(SL 679)

In the letter above, Hemingway expresses the sense of power and security provided by his association with this well-connected Cuban courtesan. Leopoldina knew many of Havana's political elite personally, intimately, which might have helped Hemingway in a pinch and been another motive for their prolonged friendship. Because Hemingway and Leopoldina spent much of their time together at the Floridita, it might be assumed that they met there and that their relationship was entirely sexual. Hemingway clearly considered her to be an old friend, saw her frequently, and was proud enough of the relationship to boast about it to his editor in 1949.

The letter above suggests that Hemingway may have met Leopoldina in Spain prior to José Antonio's 1936 execution. Leopoldina also spent time in Paris, another Hemingway haunt. In the 'catty dialogue' cited earlier from *How It Was*, Mary and Leopoldina both proclaim their sophistication as demonstrated by their familiarity with French weather, "No, not as hot as Paris." "No. Not as hot as Paris" (178). In *Islands in the Stream*, Hemingway may be representing Leopoldina's worldliness when the character Lil employs 'au fond', a French term unknown to most Cubans, but known to Leopoldina since she had travelled to France.<sup>4</sup>

At the Floridita starting in the 1930s, Hemingway and Leopoldina forged a Cuban friendship that lasted more than two decades; they conversed long hours, came to understand each other very well, acquired history together, comforted each other, cared for one other, and enjoyed each other's company (Serpa, Campoamor, José Luis and Roberto Herrera Sotolongo, René Villarreal cited in Fuentes and Páporov, Bulit, and SL). The author brought Leopoldina to the Finca Vigía on occasion, such as the day he

commemorated his 1918 wounding at Fossalta di Piave. On 9 July 1950, Hemingway wrote to Charles Scribner: ‘Yesterday was the 8th July. Fossalta di Piave. So I told Gianfranco we ought to make an act of celebration. So we went into town and found Leopoldina [End Page 68] and Xenophobia,<sup>5</sup> after work done, and a couple or eight drinks and ran off the Killers which is quite a good motion picture until the very last’ (SL 703).<sup>6</sup> This is not the only mention of Leopoldina in Hemingway’s letters. In a September 1950 letter, Hemingway told General Charles T. Lanham that he and Gianfranco ‘had lunch with Leopoldina, the lovely looking old whore, and the Venice boy went to take his girl to the movies and I dropped Leo off at her place and came home’ (SL 715).

Leopoldina was also in the author’s thoughts and immediate plans during important moments in his life. When Hemingway won the Pulitzer Prize in 1953, he wrote a letter to Wallace Meyer, spoke fondly of Leopoldina, and wondered how she specifically would react to the news:

*Am sure my old whore Leopoldina whose favorite book is the one she calls Too Many Short Stories by Ernest Hemingway celebrated the award with my other friends at the Floridita. It was on the Cuban radio too at 15 minute intervals all day. Leopoldina and Co. probably think it is the Nobel Prize and they are waiting for me to come back and spend that money.*

(SL 821–822)

Above, the writer communicates his pleasure in Leopoldina’s unique sense of humor and manner of expressing herself, ‘the one she calls Too Many Short Stories by Ernest Hemingway’, and his eagerness to celebrate the Pulitzer with Leopoldina and his ‘other friends’ at the Floridita. In his hard-boiled style, Hemingway seems to employ the epithet ‘my old whore’ ironically. It was one of his habits to employ disparaging nicknames for people he loved dearly, even for himself, for example, ‘Feo [Ugly]’ for Dr. José Luis Herrera Sotolongo, ‘Mousie’ for his son Patrick, or ‘Mr. and Mrs. Fathouse-Pig’ for himself and Martha Gellhorn.

Hemingway apparently invited Leopoldina to the Finca on a regular basis — both when Mary was present and when she was not. During interviews with Yuri Páporov, accountant Roberto Herrera Sotolongo, Majordomo René Villarreal, San Francisco de Paula neighbor David Fernandez, and Hemingway’s driver Juan López all confirmed Leopoldina’s continuing presence at the Finca both before and after Mary’s arrival:

*David: ‘There were different prizes for adults. For the kids, the prize was a dollar. For them, the honor of opening an expensive bottle of whiskey, having the first drink, being the first to jump in [End Page 69] the pool, or to swim alone with Leopoldina, to sit with her at the table, or at meal time receiving the best slice of meat, which was scarce at the time.’*

*Páporov: ‘Was Leopoldina coming to the Finca Vigía often at that time?’ As I asked the question, I heard René open a bottle, and a mockingbird suddenly stopped singing in the tree beside us.*

*Roberto: 'She used to come. In the beginning when Miss Mary was absent. Later, she came even when she was around. Don Andrés used to say to my brother, 'José Luis, don't look at her with those eyes. That woman does not commit sins; she merely defends herself. So take care not to offend her.'*

(138)

Above, Leopoldina seems to hold an important place in Hemingway's inner circle in Havana, as evidenced by Don Andrés' joking, yet respectful tone. Sitting next to her, swimming with her alone, or eating beside her are coveted prizes.

Furthermore, Leopoldina may have influenced the writer's decision to donate his Nobel Prize to the Cuban people. Campoamor explains that although Hemingway sometimes pretended otherwise, his close friends understood that he had long wanted to win the Nobel Prize. 'During one of our visits to the Avenue along the Port,' Campomoar recalled, 'Leopoldina read [Hemingway's] cards, and predicted that he would win the greatest prize of his life for his writings that had to do with Cuba' (cited in Mariño Rodríguez, *La Habana de Hemingway y Campoamor*, 75). Hemingway responded that if Leopoldina's prediction came true, he would respect the Cuban tradition and donate his prize to the shrine of the Virgen del Cobre in Santiago. When *The Old Man and the Sea* led to Hemingway's winning the Pulitzer and then the Nobel Prize, Hemingway made good on his promise, and requested that Campoamor, one of his best-connected friends in Cuba, organize a ceremony so that he could officially make his donation as a sign of his gratitude to Cuba and her people (*Mariño Rodríguez, La Habana de Hemingway y Campoamor*, 89).

In the mid-1950s, Leopoldina was diagnosed with cancer. Throughout her terminal illness, Hemingway paid her hospital bills (Bulit, interview with the author). In 1956, Leopoldina died in that same Calle Infanta apartment that [End Page 70] Hemingway had rented for her all those years. Her niece, Ilse Bulit, remembers the way Leopoldina would look at her — a young, plain-looking, mulatto girl wearing thick glasses — and tell her that her intelligence was her only way to escape poverty. Leopoldina frequently gave her money for her studies, money that may have come from Hemingway. Bulit also remembers that, in her awkward adolescence, she harbored an aversion to Hemingway for his constant sweating, his odor of alcohol, his frequent failure to acknowledge her grandmother when they saw him in public, and for an occasion when he slammed the door in Bulit's face so that he could be alone with her aunt. But recalls Bulit, Leopoldina's illness brought Hemingway much closer to their family, and particularly to Leopoldina's mother, Maria Ignacia Pedroso (Ilse's grandmother) (*SEMIac Partes I–IV*).

Bulit also remembers a particularly loud argument between Leopoldina and Hemingway that took place when Bulit was thirteen years old (1956). The quarrel concerned *The Old Man and the Sea*. On the day of the argument, Bulit recalled, 'The maid opened the door and Hemingway came in as if he owned the place. Well, he could do so because he actually paid the rent for the apartment in downtown Havana. He walked straight past me. He went directly to Leopoldina's bedroom.' Ilse's grandmother sent her to the balcony and made a sign to the maid to stay clear:

*I got closer to the bedroom. My grandmother used to say that I had a very acute sense of hearing. This has helped me a lot over my journalistic career. The things I have heard, willingly and unwillingly! But I did not have to prick up my ears. Leopoldina was almost shouting. From where was this cancer patient summoning so much strength?*

*(SEMLac Parte I).*

Leopoldina was making fun of Hemingway and calling him a liar: ‘That old man is as false as the perfumes sold at the Ten Cent on Galiano Street. He is just a hero you invented. ‘He exists,’ Hemingway repeated in broken Spanish, ‘He exists.’ (Bulit, SEMLac Parte I). The more Leopoldina insisted that he did not exist, the angrier Hemingway became. ‘Both knew their weak points well. Leopoldina was completely exasperated when he yelled at her that she was stupid’ (Bulit, SEMLac Parte I). ‘The women of our family were not raised to accept man-handling,’ reports Bulit, ‘Using a sharp tone that I still remember, Leopoldina said, ‘Let’s see if you have the courage of your fisherman after you [End Page 71] have your entrails ripped out of you or you are faced with a really desperate situation, as I am now’’ (SEMLac Parte I and interview with the author). This retort apparently left the writer speechless.

When Leopoldina died, Hemingway paid for and attended her funeral. ‘A solitary man who accompanied her remains to the cemetery paid for her funeral. He was gray haired and bearded, an American wearing a short-sleeved guayabera, large moccasins and a pair of very wide baggy pants’ (Fuentes 237). Bulit suggests that witnessing the senseless suffering of friends like Leopoldina and finally losing them may have contributed in part to Hemingway’s own feelings of hopelessness and possibly his 1961 suicide (SEMLac Parte V, 12 October 2009).

Throughout the writer’s residence in Cuba, Leopoldina was a resource concerning all things Cuban. She appears to have influenced the writer’s religious practices as well as helped him to understand and appreciate Santería (an Afro-Cuban religion combined with elements of Catholicism), popular folklore, and other elements of Cuban culture (Valdés Fernández 11–12, Campoamor cited in Mariño Rodríguez, *La Habana de Hemingway y Campoamor*, 75, Fuentes 236, and Serpa cited in Páporov 55). Campoamor confirms:

*Hemingway made himself a part of that world easily enough. Leopoldina and others led him to it. Or perhaps it was a natural affinity since those humble, simple people shared a world of illusions and hopes with Hemingway.*

*Hemingway often visited the Port, Regla, and Guanabacoa [located between the Finca Vigía and Cojimar]. Yemayá, the Goddess of the Sea, who is known popularly in Cuba as the ‘Virgen of Regla’. Sailors see her as a savior. Her figure adorns the bows of their ships. They say she appeared on September 8th, 1696, and her legend lives on today.*

*As the legend has it, after the Virgin of Regla saved sailors from stormy seas, she shined her light from the church, turning night to day, and all came to*



*witness the miracle. Ernest was a champion and a seaman, and mariners who love the sea hardly ever miss these sea festivals. Saint Lazarus' holiday falls on the 16th and 17th of December. The focal point for this festival is the place known as El Rincón where one finds the image of Saint Lazarus. Hemingway, Leopoldina, Serpa and I participated in these ceremonies [End Page 72] on several occasions.*

*(Cited in Mariño Rodríguez La Habana de Hemingway y Campoamor, 75–76)*

According to Campoamor, the importance Hemingway attributed to this religion was largely the result of Leopoldina's influence, as she believed strongly in Santería, practiced it frequently, and spoke about it with the author who was both an observant student of Cuban folklore and notoriously superstitious.

The long conversations at the Floridita with Leopoldina concerning Santería, like those that occur with Lil in *Islands in the Stream*, might certainly have helped Hemingway to acquire a multi-cultural view of Afro-Cuban religious practices. In *Islands in the Stream*, Lil, like her real life counterpart Leopoldina, has 'absolutely blind faith' in the Afro-Cuban religion, and in the Saint of Mariners, 'La Virgen de Regla', as well as Our Lady of Charity, the 'Virgen del Cobre.' Thomas Hudson admires this faith, and tells Lil that she 'must keep it.' In response, Lil reassures Hudson that the Virgen del Cobre is 'looking after' his son Tom 'day and night' (IIS 180). In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago respectfully keeps his late wife's pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Virgen of Cobre (15). He also promises to 'say ten our Fathers and ten Hail Marys' and 'make a pilgrimage to the Virgen of Cobre' (a typical Cuban tradition) (34), if he catches his fish, a promise foreshadowing the writer's own donation of his Nobel Prize medal to the Virgen of Cobre.

Although one must not confuse fiction with reality, the colorful descriptions in *Islands in the Stream* might provide scholars with a rare window to the past, an illustration of Leopoldina as seen directly from Hemingway's perspective: 'There was this lovely face looking down the bar at him, lovelier all the time as he came closer. Then he was beside her and there was the big body and the rose color was artificial now and there was no mystery about any of it, although it was still a lovely face.' When Hudson assures Honest Lil that she looks beautiful, she blushes, 'Oh, Tom, I am so big now. I am ashamed,' so he puts his hand on her great haunches and says, 'You're a nice big.' She confesses her shame at walking down the bar, but Tom insists, 'You do it beautifully. Like a ship.' Honest Lil inquires, 'How is our friend?' to which Tom reports, 'He's fine.' When will she be able to see him? Lil asks, and Tom exclaims, 'Any time. Now?' (IIS 177). In this familiar scene at the Floridita, Hudson and Lil seem to be on intimate terms, in a sexual friendship that very probably resembles Hemingway's relationship with Leopoldina. Hemingway underlines their familiarity and intimacy with comedy; the mutual friend to whom they [End Page 73] jokingly refer is none other than the protagonist's penis.

Written at a time when Hemingway was struggling with separation from his three sons and the failure of three consecutive marriages, *Islands in the Stream* dramatizes its author's sense of isolation and loss. The novel's protagonist, Thomas Hudson, has experienced the tragic deaths of all three of his sons. In the scene below, Honest Lil brings her Afro-Cuban faith to bear on comforting Hudson, who has recently learned of his oldest son and namesake's death in the war:

*'Tell me something happy, Tom.'*

*'All right,' he said. 'Let me think.'*

*'No. Tell one right away without thinking.'*

*'All right,' Thomas Hudson said. 'When young Tom was a little baby —'*

*'Qué muchacho más guapo!' Honest Lil interrupted. 'Qué noticias tienes de él?'*

*'Muy buenas.'*

*'Me alegro,' said Honest Lil, tears coming into her eyes at the thought of young Tom the flyer. 'Siempre tengo su fotografía en uniforme con el sagrado corazón de Jesús arriba de la fotografía y al lado la Virgen del Cobre.'*

*'You have great faith in the Virgen del Cobre.'*

*'Absolutely blind faith.'*

*'You must keep it.'*

*'And she is looking after Tom day and night.'*

*'Good', said Thomas Hudson. 'Serafín, another of these big ones, please. Do you want the happy story?'*

*'Yes, please', Honest Lil said. 'Please tell me the happy story. I feel sad again.'*

*(IIS 180–181)*

If *Islands in the Stream* is any indication, Leopoldina offered Hemingway company, distraction from his sorrows, and a drinking buddy during his darker times. Above, Honest Lil commiserates with Hudson, and sipping at her 'highbalito', this friend of twenty-five years listens patiently to his 'sad stories of the death of Kings', while trying to get the artist to tell stories of a happier variety (SL 679, IIS 173–198). Further, Hudson and Honest Lil seem to care for each other, each ensuring that other has eaten. The artist buys Lil a sandwich, [End Page 74] and she prods him to try and eat some of the food placed for him on the bar (IIS 174, 183). When Hudson sullenly states 'todo el mundo me conoce', Lil insists that she is the only one who really knows him: 'No they don't. They have all sorts of different ideas about you. But I know you' (179). She even knows that, like her, Hudson does not like 'porquerías [filth; piglike things]', that he really prefers just 'to make love and be happy and go to sleep' (179).

While others fail, Lil is able to help Hudson by first relaxing him and then encouraging him — gently and adeptly — to talk indirectly about early memories of his recently deceased son. By contrast, Hudson's friend Willy notes the artist's morose

disposition immediately and presses him to snap out of it, to stop ‘hoarding his grief’, and questions Hudson’s strange habit of finding solace in a passionate love affair with his cat Boise (IIS 176). But Willy’s rough prodding is unsuccessful; Hudson keeps his shell tightly shut. Initially, Hudson claims his sadness comes from the weather. Lil knows him better than that. She realizes he is lying because he usually says a ‘norther’ cheers him up and gives him the ‘pep’ to make love to her (179).

Lil earns Hudson’s trust by telling him that she keeps a photograph of young Tom the flyer and prays for him. In this way, she acts both as a model of faith and as a substitute mother for Hudson’s son. Then, to raise his spirits and to break down his stoic heartache, Lil gently goads Hudson to ‘break the house record’ for most daiquiris consumed in one sitting at El Floridita. Honest Lil acts not only as a model of faith, but as a drinking buddy. After building Hudson’s morale with sexual innuendo, happy stories, and alcohol, she transitions to the role of a much-needed therapist. After drinking and talking for a little while with his confidant, Hudson feels a ‘little less sad’, about ‘el mundo entero.’ (IIS 75 )

While Hudson becomes distracted speaking of other subjects, Lil coaxes him to tell her about his feelings, ‘about love’ (IIS 178). Hudson responds that ‘telling never did me any good’, that ‘telling is worse for me than not telling.’ Undaunted, Lil makes every effort to cheer Tom up, by encouraging him to tell stories with ‘some love’ in them, complimenting his ego by making a pass at him, and inquiring whether or not they will be going to his place or hers (185). Nonetheless, thoughts of lost happiness with his first wife, of suicide, and of his present quarrels with his present wife haunt the grieving artist (181). Lil does not allow Hudson to pursue this negative direction. ‘No es mujer para ti. But let us not speak against her’ (193). Instead she suggests that they think about the ‘happiest time’ Tom remembers, and put ‘some love in it’ (186). [End Page 75]

Clearly, Lil, like Hudson, is a sensitive soul who cares deeply for the artist and his son, so discussing the boy’s death directly would prove too painful for either of them to bear. In order to protect Lil — and perhaps to protect himself — Hudson does not tell Lil (IIS 128, 172). Together, they keep a stiff upper lip, and stoically pretend that nothing has happened, that his son is still alive. Piercing Hudson’s shell slowly, Lil finally gets him to admit that he feels ‘sorrow’, ‘awfully sad’, even ‘a little bit old’ (178). Then, Lil adroitly allows Hudson to vent without pushing him too hard towards painful emotions. Instead, he tells her about his recent trip to the Far East, which bears a resemblance to Hemingway’s travels to the Orient with Martha Gellhorn, and recounts his sexual exploits there: a foursome in his hotel room with three Chinese prostitutes (189).

Making a date with Lil, Hudson promises to ‘take her to the bar of the crazies’, a Havana café across from the psychiatric hospital. This bar actually existed on Ranchero Boyeros Avenue, near Havana’s Mazorra insane asylum, and some of the patients, albeit not the dangerous cases, had permission to visit (Cruz 192). Opening up a bit more, Hudson discloses intimate thoughts, such as his memories about Indians, and tells a story about a moment of intense fear when he was trapped underwater. Finally, he is speaking so much that Lil can barely get a word in. As Cuban scholar Cruz underlines,

‘the reader already knows that this boy is dead, so that the continuation of the dialogue exhibits even more the double recording — text and subtext — that characterizes Hemingway’s works and particularly the conversations in the *Floridita*.’ Lil becomes ‘an indirect vehicle for revealing the struggle being waged in the man’s conscience’ and their dialogue becomes a monologue (Cruz 190–191).

Although Thomas Hudson and Honest Lil’s relationship is fictitious, the analysis above suggests that Hemingway and Leopoldina enjoyed a vital real-life relationship and that she inspired numerous details in *Islands in the Stream* and, to a lesser extent, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Interviews with Fernando Campoamor, Enrique Serpa, José Luis and Roberto Sotolongo, René Villarreal, David Fernandez, Hemingway’s driver Juan López, and Ilse Bulit, as well as Hemingway’s own letters confirm that for more than twenty years Leopoldina was an important source of information to the author about Cuban culture, politics, religion, and folklore. Their lasting relationship appears to have been one of meaningful confidences and sincere friendship as well as emotional and possibly physical affection. Curiously, scholarship has ignored the relationship between Leopoldina Rodríguez and Ernest Hemingway. Much concerning [End Page 76] Hemingway’s experiences in Cuba remains terra incognita, uncharted territory obscured by a half-century of strained political relations with our southern neighbors. The original documents, objects, and books with Hemingway’s notes at the Finca Vigía represent an important opportunity for North American scholars willing to discover a territory and a people that perhaps we have yet to — truly — comprehend.

#### Notes

1. *Leopoldina’s lover and the father of her son, Alberto Barraqué, was the scion of an important Cuban political family. His own father, Jesús María Barraqué, had been a member of Gerardo Machado’s cabinet. Although Leopoldina and Alfredo Barraqué never married, Leopoldina often employed his last name in order to borrow its legitimacy and aristocracy for herself and their son, Alberto, Jr. (Bulit, SEMlac IV).*
2. *‘His mood of euphoria lasted through most of the summer. He helped Roberto make up a birthday purse for ‘Leopoldina’, the ageing Havana prostitute’ (Baker 592).*
3. *‘Primo de Rivera’s boy’ refers to José Antonio Primo de Rivera, founder of the Spanish Fascist party, the Falange. José Antonio was the son of General Miguel Primo de Rivera, Prime Minister (and dictator) of Spain from 1923–1930.*
4. *Hudson remarks that his whipped, frozen daiquiri looks like the wake of a boat doing thirty knots. He wonders how his daiquiri would look if it were phosphorescent, which leads to a discussion of the Cuban custom of eating the phosphorous found in match heads to commit suicide. A morbid discussion of suicide ensues, suggesting Hudson’s own dark thoughts and depression after having lost his sons. Honest Lil insists that drinking shoe ink and iodine are ‘au fond’ gestures, cries for help and not serious suicide attempts like the auto da fé, the classic method of Cuban women in response to betrayed love, pouring alcohol on themselves and setting themselves on fire as a passionate last expression of rage (IIS 181).*
5. *Xenophobia was the nickname Hemingway assigned to a young Floridita prostitute who had an aversion to foreigners.*
6. *Hemingway’s ‘running off’ or showing the movie himself suggests a home projector, and that he and Gianfranco may have brought Leopoldina and Xenophobia to the Finca.*

