



Seminar

ALEXANDRA URAKOVA

Johan Peter Falck Fellow, SCAS.
Senior Researcher, A.M. Gorky Institute of World Literature,
Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow

*Race, Slavery, and the Perils of Gift-Giving: Rereading *The Liberty Bell* and Cassey's *Album**

Tuesday, 13 April 2021, 2:15 p.m.

Due to the precautions imposed by the current Corona pandemic, the Thunberg Hall will be closed to the public until further notice.

You are therefore invited to join the seminar via Zoom instead:
<https://uu-sc.zoom.us/j/67752473991>

S W E D I S H
COLLEGIUM
for ADVANCED STUDY

www.swedishcollegium.se

ABOUT ALEXANDRA URAKOVA

Alexandra Urakova completed her PhD in American Literature at the Moscow State University in 2005. Ever since her graduate years, she has been working as a Research Fellow at the A.M. Gorky Institute of World Literature and has taught at major Russian universities, including Moscow State University, Russian State University for the Humanities, and the Higher School of Economics. In 2007-2008, she had a Fulbright Scholarship at the University of Virginia, followed by research fellowships in Berlin and London. More recently, she has held the titles Senior Core Fellow at IAS CEU Budapest and Core Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies.

Urakova's primary field of expertise is American literature. She has published a book entitled 'The Poetics of the Body in the Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe' (2009, in Russian), edited the collection *Deciphering Poe: Subtexts, Contexts, Subversive Meanings* (Lehigh University Press, 2013), and published numerous essays and chapters on nineteenth-century American literature, including a chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Edgar Allan Poe* (2019).

At the same time, her research has a wider comparative and interdisciplinary scope. Among the books she co-edited are 'Poe, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky: Splendors and Miseries of National Genius' (2017, in Russian) and 'Literary Cult as a Phenomenon of Contemporary Literary Process: Author, Text, Reader' (2011, in Russian). Currently, she is co-editing a multi-disciplinary volume entitled *The Dangers of Gifts from Antiquity to the Digital Age* (Routledge, forthcoming).

At SCAS, Urakova will be exploring languages, literatures and ideologies of the so-called "modern" gift, with a special focus on North America and Europe. Her work will address the nineteenth-century history of the gift in a literary and comparative perspective.

ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century ideology and language of the gift are closely intertwined with the question of race and slavery, which is especially true for the North-American literary history. In my presentation, I will discuss the racial dimension of the sentimental language of gift-giving and its role in the construction of racial identity. The presentation consists of two parts and two case studies respectively.

In the first part, I will examine the popular idea of freedom as a gift that circulated in the pages of an antislavery gift book, *The Liberty Bell* (1839-1857). A Christmas present and a sacrifice on the altar of emancipation, the gift book was itself a materialized "freedom's gift" distributed at anti-slavery fairs that were held by female abolitionists at Christmastime throughout the antebellum years. No surprise it contributed to the meta-narrative of white benevolence – the story of unilateral gift-giving from white abolitionists to their Black "brethren." While reconstructing the mainstream rhetoric of *The Liberty Bell*, I will also discuss texts that disrupted this meta-narrative by addressing the subject of harmful, useless, or inconsiderate gifts to the slaves.

The second part will examine the way free black communities used sentimental culture of gift-giving as they were seeking an alternative and more positive way of appreciating communal reciprocity, on the example of the antebellum Philadelphia friendship album belonging to a Black abolitionist Amy Mathilda Cassey. Reading the album through the lens of terminology suggested by Roberto Esposito, I will discuss how the album contributors constructed their communal identity through trivial but meaningful acts of gift-giving, gestures of attention, support, and solidarity.