

Kasia Boddy

The Short Story Anthology: Between Locality and Nation

During the academic year 1910 to 1911, the critic and philologist C. Alphonso Smith served as Theodore Roosevelt Exchange Professor at the University of Berlin. While there he gave a series of lectures arguing for the importance of short story in showing 'the variety in unity and the unity in variety that have always been characteristic of American life.' Short-story writers, he maintained, have 'thus helped to bridge the chasm made by the Civil War. They have enabled the different sections to know each other, and with wider knowledge there has come a better understanding and a more intelligent sympathy. When the great American novel comes to be written it will draw largely upon the short story, for it will interpret the local in terms of the national.' Three years later, Edward J. O'Brien launched the annual Best American Stories series, with the argument that the 'eclectic culture' of the anthology would contribute to a 'national unity of democratic utterance'. The anthology, in other words, was a mode, which would formally enact the ongoing struggle between what Smith called 'the centrifugal tendency of sectionalism and the centripetal force of national unity'. My talk will consider the part played by the anthology (as it operated between the short story, and the Great American Novel) in early twentieth-century debates about those tendencies.