The subject of this dissertation, to boldly state it, is the history of Asian American literary formation. The tradition of formalist criticism of literature, reaching down from the Russian formalist school, has been confronted with suspicion and modified by the Marxist revolution of the notion of "form." Realism and modernism converge in my investigation of Asian American literary forms, along with other equally "cliché" literary and cultural concepts, including satire, the Bildungsroman, cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and identity. However, to return to this formal tradition of literary criticism is not to canonize Asian American literature or treat Asian American literature as a fixed philosophical abstraction. By re-introducing the formal method to Asian American literary studies, I will examine the historical formation of Asian American fictions, which are categorized with three thematic features—survival, transformation, and contradiction. From survival to transformation to contradiction, from realism to modernism, Asian American fiction has experienced and reflected the demographic vicissitudes of Asian America in its adaptation of different forms. The study of form points to the extension of Asian American literature from a domestic enlightenment project to a transnational, diasporic observation.

Each of the three body chapters centers on one category and closely examines two novels that represent the features of that category: America Is in the Heart by Carlos Bulosan and All I Asking for Is My Body by Milton Murayama for survival fiction, Donald Duk by Frank Chin and Native Speaker by Chang-rae Lee for transformation fiction, and Fixer Chao by Han Ong and The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri for contradiction fiction. Applying realism, modernism and various sub-forms as the formal method, I argue that the progression of Asian American forms testifies to the active autonomy of literature in Asian American studies. In my argumentation, I tend to resume literary criticism in Asian American literary studies and study Asian American literature as literature instead of a mere cultural production or a historical continuation, without discharging its historicity.