

Look At This Blue by Allison Adelle Hedge Coke  
Review by Rodolfo Avelar

What does it mean to write a poem about California? A state with an extensive and violent history of genocide, a state that chooses who deserves to have resources funneled to them. A state where species of plant and animal life are constantly at the brink of mass extinction, a state that is beautiful to be in? Allison Hedge Coke's *Look At This Blue* is a poem, a response, an assembling, and an offering that continually turns and refracts a new kind of light on California, unearthing, exposing, and celebrating. It is a poem that asks us to look at what is being put in front of us and face it.

Coming in at 120 pages, written in a rotation of forms and emotional registers, Hedge Coke's poem makes meaning out of the proximity of the various truths of California that she is working through: personal narratives, cataloguing of the extinction of plant and animal life, naming of Indigenous groups who have been erased from or shrouded in California's official memory, the beauty of its landscape, and the times the landscape has been in disaster. By weaving in and out of these engagements, Hedge Coke created a work that intrinsically links them all together. The knowing of one of them will forever be linked to my knowing of the others. Early on in the poem, as Hedge Coke lays the groundwork and sets the stage for the themes to build over the course of the poem, she writes:

“Lemon-wedge half-moon pops over  
  flat Cosumnes shallows  
over sweet sound, low rustle in Lodi water  
  chortle trill night language from standing  
cranes, sandhills, they've been there  
  all along, standing still knee-deep in station pools.”

Over the course of my time with this poem, I keep coming back to this section. The lines, “..they've been there / all along, standing still...” remind me of what Hedge Coke seems to be circling back to over and over in the poem: these violences and harms to people and to nature have always been here. They don't just exist in this poem, they existed before this poem and they will continue to exist, the ramifications will continue to exist.

The horrors that Hedge Coke works through in this poem are felt by every person living in California, daily. Hedge Coke reminds us of this, “What we carry howls      boggling.” *Look At This Blue* also launches into personal narratives, where Hedge Coke is able to weave the histories from her own lineages into the greater tapestry of California's history, making concrete the ways that California's legal and governmental systems have more often than not failed its people. In many ways, these sections of the book feel like an enactment of this line, that these are moments, curated by California's governmental structure, that have been howling and reverberating for years inside of the speaker's mind. They aren't easy passages to read, it is hard to face that all of this was allowed to happen, but Hedge Coke does not back down from the page. It is as if she saying: if it really happened, then you need to face it, it can't be too much.

Despite this, *Look At This Blue*, also renders in masterful verse a California that is beautiful to exist in. The beauty is not in the poem for the sake of reminding us what we should fighting for, it doesn't serve that purpose. Instead, when Hedge Coke drops into these descriptions, I feel like I am being asked to "enjoy the reason we were gifted these particular atoms." So much of this poem continues to come forward in my day to day life, its goals and truths have infiltrated me in the ways a good poem does. This is a poem that will ring through my body for years to come. A true poet at her best, Allison Adelle Hedge Coke has written an epic poem for the ages.