

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE, A HISTORY OF BEAUTY

a review by Jill Goad

Allison Adelle Hedge Coke.
Look at This Blue: A Poem.
Coffee House Press, 2022.

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ALLISON ADELLE HEDGE COKE, raised in North Carolina, is the author of several poetry collections, including *Streaming* (Coffee House Press, 2014; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016). She has also written a memoir, *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer* (University of Nebraska Press, 2004). Hedge Coke's poetry and creative nonfiction have appeared in a variety of venues, including *Poetry Out Loud*, *World Literature Today*, *the New York Times*, *Harvard Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Iowa Review*, and elsewhere. Read an interview with her in *NCLR* 2020.

Allison Adelle Hedge Coke's *Look at This Blue*, a finalist for the 2022 National Book Award, is a book-length assemblage poem that tells the story of California, where she currently lives, mingling its past and present while focusing on episodes of violence against people and the environment. Alongside depictions of familial abuse, genocide, mistreatment of people at the hands of the state's institutions, and destruction of flora and fauna, she offers subtler descriptions of human resilience and the persistence of natural beauty. Hedge Coke's portrayal of California is not a hopeful or optimistic one; it is instead vast, diverse, frightening, and sometimes redeeming, a push to make readers aware of the varied and often unpleasant stories that make a place what it is.

Two epigraphs set the book's tone and establish its thematic focus of *Look at This Blue*. The first, reads, "once, the world was gleaming, open, we entered / unknowing, believing all we came to / we must deserve, knowing we did not faced / extinction." And the second, a quotation from Tanya Tagaq's "Retribution," reads, "The path we have taken has rotted / Ignite, stand upright, conduct yourself like lightning." Together, the epigraphs are an indictment of everyone who has played a part in California's various extinctions, a realistic portrayal of a decaying world, and a call to action that encourages readers to understand the chaos of current life without resigning themselves to it.

Hedge Coke's work is heavily concerned with the violence people perpetrate against each other, implying that such

violence is unjustly part of the fabric of life. In fragmented lines, choppy spaced to create a disorienting, stress-inducing series of images, Hedge Coke depicts victims of violence such as the "Child choked out, belt at throat" or the

beautiful boy,
made to eat cat feces,
vomit, pepper sprayed, made
to live in a cabinet, box,
bound and gagged at eight because
you might be gay.

Turning the lens on her experiences with domestic violence, Hedge Coke remembers being "bruised from brow to jaw, pummeled / what a mess"; lying to her mother-in-law about the nature of her frequent injuries; and suffering each time her husband was released from prison and found her again. Although the poet pays much attention to the ways people can brutally and physically hurt each other, in *Look at This Blue*, individual violent acts do not exist in a bubble: the personal is connected to the historical and to the collective, as is evident in Hedge Coke's examples of California's fraught history.

Indicting California's past, Hedge Coke refers to the state's dubious label as "free-soil state upon statehood" when the Indian Act of 1850 "authorized arrests / of any *vagrant* Natives to be *hired out* to highest bidder," allowing "Native children to be indentured. . . / by any white persons who wished for laborers." Other parts of the poem refer to the enslavement, torture, and murder of Indigenous people in missions in the 1700s. Additionally, Chinese immigrants were blocked from immigrating to California

in the 1880s, and in the 1920s, California violently removed four hundred thousand Mexican American people who were misnamed as “illegal aliens.” After providing a formidable list of massacres that took place in California, Hedge Coke refers to it as the “Land of the – / war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide / without limitations, statute.” For readers who might assume that California’s violent

treatment of these populations is safely in the past and sufficiently acknowledged, Hedge Coke refers to California’s failure to ratify the 14th and 15th Amendments “granting citizenship to former / slaves and ensuring the rights of black men to vote – until the middle of / the 20th century.”

More recently, California border agents have shot fleeing migrants in the back, claim-

ing “fear of life.” Over the past few years, detained California immigrants have died in police custody when denied lifesaving medical care. These instances, according to Hedge Coke, are emblematic of daily cases of institutional neglect and abuse suffered by California’s citizens, such as an impoverished old woman injured in a car accident, sent home by the police in a cab to suffer, “walking on an unattended broken leg,” or a bullied child at school ignored by teachers, leading Hedge Coke to the declaration, “Schools were made to break us.”

In connecting the personal to the collective and the historical, Hedge Coke relates violence against humans with violence against nature, another aspect of California’s story. Because “nothing here [is] on guardian watch,” 120,000 acres of Los Padres National Forest were destroyed in a wildfire, displacing wildlife, including pumas and foxes. Hedge Coke mentions, too, that defunding national parks during COVID left this wildlife unprotected from destructive visitors. Almost twenty pages of *Look at This Blue* list mammals, birds, amphibians, insects, and fish that are extinct because they have been treated as “temporary, expendable” by humans’ focus on “taking / taking, taking, taking,” and Hedge Coke notes that this overwhelming list is only “a partial recount.” (Climate change means that “We’re all sitting on ground near enough what might go under, liquify, / on what used to be an ocean” and that the “1989 Loma

Prieta earthquake / will be less costly than 2025 rise.” Ultimately, Hedge Coke argues that “we will surely not endure” because natural elements such as rain, “savanna grasses, / forests, sea oats” have been commodified.

Despite the formidable darkness that pervades Hedge Coke’s assemblage poem, there are moments of resilience and beauty, a testament to California’s complicated history. In one evening scene, cranes “chortle trill night language.” The return of a male gray wolf for the first time in almost a century in Ventura County is a symbol of hope as bright as the “100 thousand million stars in the sky.” In another part of the poem, the return of the condor is akin to the rise of the phoenix, and immediately after, Hedge Coke encourages humans to similarly pull themselves from the ashes: “Let love lead. / . . . / Let all of us, all of us, all of us, let all of us be unbroken. / Take heart.” As an example of letting love lead, Hedge Coke tells the story of a woman “who loved children so much / she forced the city to put in a crosswalk / for grade school kids crossing, running late,” a seemingly small gesture that kept children safe for decades. Again, the individual and collective and the personal and the historical are all entwined.

One thread that speaks to the complexity of California’s story is the repetition of the title, *Look at This Blue*. In six places, the phrase is left aligned at the top of the page. The first mention of the phrase precedes a description of the Xerxes blue butterfly, “first-known American butterfly to



PHOTOGRAPH BY EVAN AGOSTINI/INVISION/AP

become extinct due to humans / first known,” while the second comes before a discussion of the Palos Verdes blue butterfly that was thought extinct but was rediscovered. Other references depict mutant blue-eyed coyotes, endangered Mission blue butterflies, the blue whale that ingests plastics along with krill, and the vulnerable Hidden Lake bluecurl flower. All these living things have a common link – the potential for destruction at human hands the potential to persist if humans pay attention. Hedge Coke gives these plants and animals a story that indicts humans for their destructive tendencies while urging them to do something about the problems they have caused.

Look at this Blue ends with two short lines from singer Joni

Mitchell: “Will you take me as I am? / California?”* This probing question follows more than one hundred pages of often overwhelming images of death, degradation, injustice, and struggle in the state. Will the book’s readers accept California as it is – beautiful, burning, sinking, a site of pain and persistence? Although Hedge Coke dedicates her book in part to “California, our beloved,” she does not expect an easy answer to her closing question, nor does she provide one. Her emphasis on complication and contradiction gives *Look at This Blue* its appeal while also leaving the reader with a sense of uncertainty as to where California’s story will go next and where, perhaps, it will end. ■

PHOTOGRAPH BY NATHALIE SCHUELLER



ABOVE Allison Adelle Hedge Coke with her granddaughter Hazel at the 2022 National Book Awards, New York, 16 Nov. 2022

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* Joni Mitchell, “California,” *Blue* (Reprise, 1971).