

Jennifer Smith  
Dr. Marcel Cornis-Pope  
MATX 601: Texts and Textuality  
October 4, 2007

### **It's a Doll-Eat-Doll World: Gendered Commentary in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

*In the 5th century B.C.  
an Indian philosopher  
Gautama teaches "All is emptiness"  
and "There is no self."  
In the 20th century A.D.  
Barbie agrees, but wonders how a man  
with such a belly could pose,  
smiling, and without a shirt.*

*"Buddhist Barbie," Denise Duhamel*

The variety of mediums available for social commentary has exploded the arena of sexual politics to allow for an ever-increasing range of content, and in doing so has brought to light some of the emerging differences in modes of discussion in this century. In a traditionally male-dominated arena of communication technology, new forms of technological discourse are diversifying the playing field of communication, and allowing for more divergent and exploratory voices to contribute to the conversation surrounding sexual and gender identity. One can find analysis and interrogation of such themes exemplified in commentaries on Barbie, including the textually based poems of Denise Duhamel<sup>1</sup> and the equally compelling, though largely different, music video of Aqua's "Barbie Girl."<sup>2</sup> While these texts utilize differing modes of production to elicit unique responses, there are many common themes echoed throughout the discussions of Barbie and her place in society, and the plurality of means of dissemination of these

---

<sup>1</sup> For the complete text of the Denise Duhamel poems referenced within this discussion, please see the appendix at the close of the essay.

<sup>2</sup> These are just two of the many representations of Barbie and Barbiesque motifs that abound in various discourses. Other notable artistic works surrounding the idea of Barbie in society include Tom Foysythe's "Food Chain Barbie" photography series and the book *Mondo Barbie*, edited by Lucinda Ebersole and Richard Peabody.

messages draws to light some of the logistics and uses inherent to differing modes of communication.

Barbie is ubiquitous in today's society, as women flock to surgeons to try and achieve the physical ideals she represents and men flock to bars to try to find their own real-life version on this plastic babe. For these reasons, among others, any analysis of Barbie must hinge on coverage of the doll as a model of the American sexualized female, and Denise Duhamel's poetry surrounding the subject does just that. Duhamel writes of "Barbie's signature trait of forgoing bra or panties / whether she's out raking leaves or hostessing a formal party ("Why Barbie and Ken Don't Dress in Underwear," 2-3), and muses that some "speculate it has to do with titillation" (7), thereby calling to light the culture of sexualization that any knowledge of Barbie brings to the forefront. Yet, as Duhamel asserts, "it is a complicated issue" ("Why Barbie and Ken Don't Dress in Underwear," 1), and many of her poems suggest an ultimate discrepancy between the doll as a sexual goddess and the doll as an androgynous being. In her text, "Kinky," Duhamel emphasizes the physicality of this very artificial doll, relating a tale in which Barbie and Ken find their highest sexual pleasure by the exchange of body parts. Phallically suggestive lines describe the swapping of heads, as "Barbie squeezes the small opening under her chin / over Ken's bulging neck socket. His wide jaw line jostles / atop his girlfriend's body, loosely" (2-3). Employing the poetic device of enjambment, Duhamel illustrates the physical act of separation literarily, ending the lines not at where the two bodies meet but where they remain apart. The line stops before Barbie's head meets Ken's body, and Ken's head jostles in empty space at the end of the line before it is united with the female body.

Further sexualizing the tryst, the poem asserts that “Ken wants to feel Barbie’s toes between his lips, / take off one of her legs and force his whole arm inside her” (9-10). These lines play on notions of pleasure and touch, as the reader knows that, even should Ken take Barbie’s foot into his mouth, he would be unable to truly “feel” the sensations that result. The violent imagery of these lines also reiterate issues of sexualization and victimization, as the dolls, lacking any true genitalia, must resort to means of obtrusive brutality to satisfy their sexual urges. The absence of functioning, human bodies heightens the tension of the impossibility of sexual union between the traditionally romantic pair, and the poem masterfully highlights this thwarted physicality in a very bodily sense.

This theme of disembodiment is also echoed in Aqua’s music video “Barbie Girl.” First appearing in 1997, this song and video work to both construct and deconstruct our common mythology surrounding Barbie, and, in fact, engage in the destruction and resurrection of Barbie herself. Relaying a day in the life of Barbie in a very bubblegum pop-style, the narrative circles around a fictionalized Barbie and Ken as they enjoy the delights of their plastic lifestyle. In one of the final scenes, as “Barbie” and “Ken” party with their similarly plasticized friends, dancing around the plastic pool, Ken accidentally pulls off Barbie’s arm. With a look of feigned surprise, Ken does a double-take as he peers down, slack-jawed at the arm in his hand, while Barbie covers her mouth in mock embarrassment. Ken, then, is showcased in the foreground of the next shot, looking slyly into the camera as he sings “Come on Barbie, let’s go party,” beckoning her towards him with her very own arm. We, the viewers, are allowed in on the joke, and the condescending nature of this backhanded invitation is not lost on us. Barbie, meanwhile,

rests at the edge of the pool in the background of the shot, unable to join in the festivities and instead lamenting the loss of her arm. In response to Ken's invitation, Barbie is only able to voice a meaningless "Ah ah ah yay," or "Oh-o-o, Oh-o-o." In this act of disfigurement, Ken renders Barbie incomplete and voiceless when he "unarms" her and indeed uses the stolen body part to lure her back to him. Unable to face a version of herself made less complete by the loss of her arm, Barbie quickly reunites with Ken and once again assumes the whimsical roll that she has fulfilled for the majority of the music video. As Ken tenderly kisses the arm that he has restored to its rightful place on Barbie's body, Barbie gushes, "Oh I'm having so much fun!" to which Ken replies, "Well, Barbie, we're just getting started." As a shooting star passes in the background, Ken and Barbie reconcile with a kiss, and the music video draws to a close. This scene illustrates the reliance of the female body on a male counterpart, and the stereotypical feminine weakness in the face of the more aggressive male. Ken uses Barbie's body against her, in much the same way that a collective psychology of American society allows for thousands of girls to starve, diet, and berate their own bodies into submissiveness in patronage of a collective ideal of the Barbie-like body.

Issues such as representations of the body lend themselves particularly well to visual modes of discourse. In Aqua's music video, the neon colors, exaggerated movements, and cliché-like scenes indicate a whimsy in sharp contrast to the deeper meaning of the text. Critical analysis must acknowledge that rather than subtracting from deeper issues, Aqua's "pop" sound and visual artifice enhance the contradictions and negations of a cultural text mired in impossibility and fantasy yet internalized as a realistic attainment in much of the culture. Such methods highlight significant and far-

reaching suggestions in terms of the role of gender in this mass-market society, and even untrained observers can note the discrepancy between the seriousness of message the video relays and the seeming triviality of the cultural artifact used as a subject.<sup>3</sup>

As much as Barbie has come to represent gendered consciousness in American discourse, she also represents a unique “other” in terms of sexual identity. Female identification is inextricably tied to biological notions of sexuality and genesis, features that Barbie is unable to embody. In Duhamel’s “Kinky,” when Barbie becomes excited at the sight of her body beneath Ken’s head, which now appoints him “part circus freak, / part thwarted hermaphrodite” (15-16), she also imagines that “she is somebody else – maybe somebody middle class and ordinary” (17). When Barbie looks at Ken’s head and sees him as the androgynous other, she must also simultaneously imagine herself removed from the situation, else she risks the distinct possibility of recognizing that same androgyny in herself as well. When viewed in conversation with Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Duhamel’s Barbie represents a rudimentary version of Haraway’s cyborg; with no origin myth (indeed, no means of generating a biological origin myth), transgressing the boundaries between human and artificial, and implanting herself into our cultural consciousness so deeply that we immediately recognize both the doll and what she stands for. Barbie, in effect, becomes “disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway, 518). Accordingly, while the notion of Barbie rejects an origin myth, Duhamel illustrates the need that we have to thrust one upon her; thereby making her more like us. Haraway asserts “an origin story in the “Western,” humanist

---

<sup>3</sup> The apparentness of such a message can be seen in terms of the legal ramifications of Aqua’s project, as Mattel, the makers of Barbie, initiated a suit against Aqua stemming from the production and release of “Barbie Girl.” Mattel claimed that the single infringed on copyright and unfairly associated “sexual and other unsavory themes with Mattel’s Barbie products” (“Aqua Triumphant”).

sense depends on the myth of the original unity, fullness, bliss, and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate” (517). Several of Duhamel’s poems reinforce our need to insert this myth of inherent humanity and naturalness as pertinent to those icons that we hold up as exemplary. In “One Afternoon When Barbie Wanted to Join the Military,”

A young photographer who lived in the house  
 dipped [Barbie’s] legs in a full bottle of Johnson’s Baby Oil,  
 then swabbed more on her torso.  
 Barbie lounged on the red satin lining  
 of the kid’s Sunday jacket. He dimmed  
 the lights and lit a candle  
 to create a glossy centerfold mood.  
 “Lick your lips,” he kept saying,  
 forgetting Barbie didn’t have a tongue.  
 She couldn’t pout. She couldn’t even bite  
 the maraschino cherry he dangled in front of her mouth.  
 Luckily there was no film in his sister’s camera,  
 so the boy’s pictures never came out.

(36-48)

A critical analysis of this poem lends itself to a reading that dictates that we, the reader, become the young boy in the poem, sexualizing the doll, commanding feats of physicality (and thereby humanity) impossible for such an inanimate object, yet nonetheless repeating such commands over and over. We perpetually equate the Barbie ideal with a

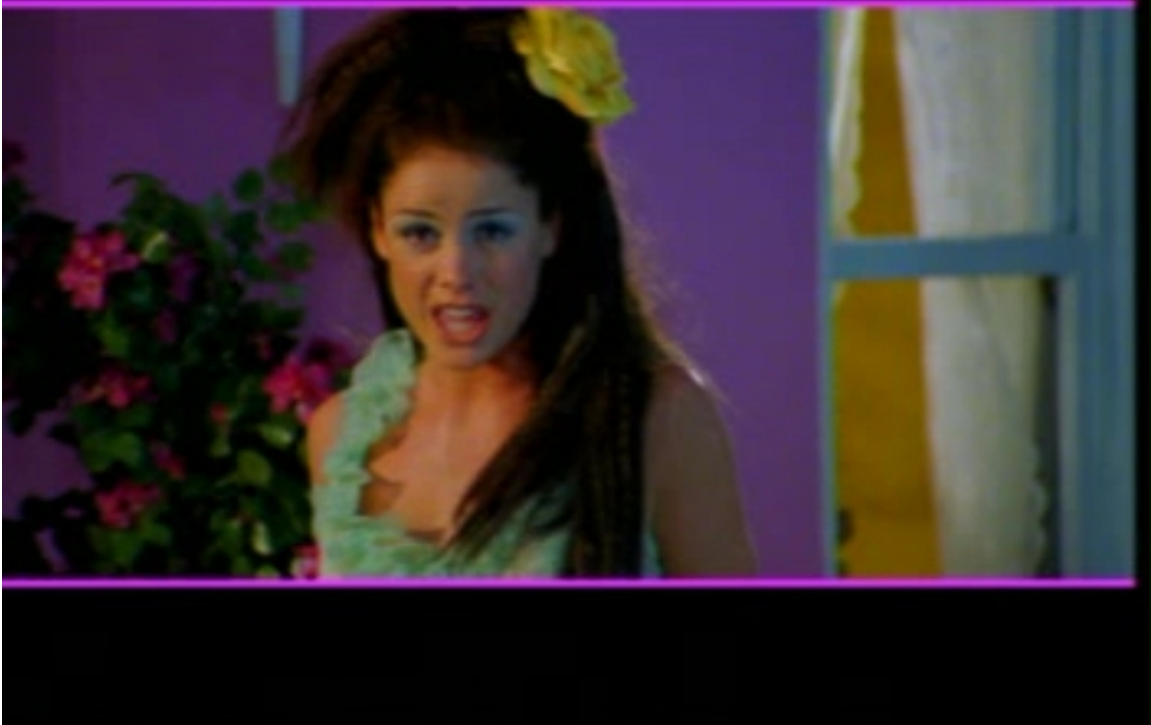
human one, and Duhamel suggests that, for as long as we do this, we too may never have the pictures “come out.”

Themes of latent sexuality are frequently exposed in modes of discourse centering on traditional literary texts. Duhamel’s texts powerfully suggest the futility of our desire, and focusing her inquiry into gendered conceptions of Barbie in a textually-based medium allows for greater introspection, a slower pace, and an omniscient perspective that encourages a critical reading of the lines at hand. While we do not actually “hear,” the boy say the lines above, they echo in our imagination, as does his “forgetting” of Barbie’s physical restraints, rather than his simply ignoring or imagining them away. This perspective, one in which a narrator relates the scene while the reader constructs it in her head, seems to encourage deeper insight and introspection of common tropes or fallacies, and engages an active reader in the art of both construction and deconstruction. In neglecting to name this young protagonist, Duhamel effectively allows the reader to fill in this image himself, perhaps even of himself. Duhamel’s poetry is unique in that it both extols and condemns the generative desires we hold as humans, suggesting that while humanity demands the projection of gendered ideals on its members, we remain constrained still by the limitations of physics.

Music videos often complicate such issues of textual versus visual art, as they frequently utilize both auditory text and visual representations of that text to achieve a very directed, very specific end. The novel marketing idea of music videos, conflating the realms of television and radio, is said to have been largely successful *because* of the sexuality and accessibility that these videos encouraged (“Music on Television”).<sup>4</sup> While

---

<sup>4</sup> In fact, it is suggested that stars such as Madonna and Mylene Farmer “owed a great deal of their success to the skillful construction and seductive appeal of their videos” (“Music Video”).



there are numerous videos that do not prescribe to those ideals, Aqua's "Barbie Girl" is one that utilizes such easily accessible tropes to further a larger agenda. The video opens with an updated "Ken" inviting a Brunette "Barbie" to join him for a ride, a prospect which she seems all too delighted to entertain. At the outset, the "Barbiness" of Barbie no longer lies in her long, blonde hair or her stark immovability, but now rests in the plastic scene in which we find her, in her flippant enthusiasm, and in Ken's naming her (Ken drives up to say, "Hiya Barbie, wanna go for a ride?"). While Haraway asserts that "consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute," (519), this music video employs a consciousness of *inclusion* through naming, asserting that the female *is* defined by what she is named, rather than what she is not. Interestingly, the lines of the song contradict the visual text of the video, as the female lead sings, "I'm a blonde single girl in the fantasy world / Dress me up, take your time, I'm your dollie" ("Barbie Girl"). However, the lead female sports a brunette coif and seems only marginally single, in that the video and commonly accepted Barbie mythology are deeply entrenched in the dynamics of her

romantic relationship to Ken. These facts, viewed in the light of the lyrics of the song, further implicate the notions of naming in which “identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic” (Haraway, 519). As a “Barbie Girl,” this character does not necessarily need to subscribe to every aspect of Barbieness that has been branded as Barbie to nonetheless retain her image and the power that comes with that association. Haraway



further indicates that “there is nothing about being “female” that naturally binds women” (519). Yet it seems that this video is suggesting that there is, in fact, something about being “Barbie” that binds women, or at least the *desire to be Barbie* binds women who don’t even expressly fit into our preconceived notions of Barbie’s identity.

As Aqua’s Barbie locates her identity through naming, she also derives much of her sense of self by the role that she plays in the lives of males. In Ken’s convertible, Barbie begins the song with the lyrics, “I’m a Barbie girl in the Barbie world / Life in plastic, it’s fantastic / You can brush my hair, undress me everywhere / Imagination, life

is your creation” (“Barbie Girl”). Thus, from the outset of the video, Barbie is established as a receptacle of male desire. Like Haraway’s Cyborg, Barbie is sterilized (“wrapped in plastic”) and removed from conceptions of “naturalness.” Yet unlike Haraway’s Cyborg, who, “does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion of a finished whole, a city and cosmos,” (Haraway, 517), Aqua’s Barbie does, in fact, yearn for that completion or creation. Her introduction to the song and the viewer is that of passivity, sexualization, and vapidness. No matter if Barbie is uttering these lines to Ken or the viewer, the end result is the same; Barbie is nothing without the imagination of others. Even Duhamel’s Barbie must rely on the creations of others to fulfill her own destiny, as “Barbie wonders if its cheating / when she dreams of fashion doll boyfriends / Mattel never made for her to play with” (“Marriage, 1-3). While Haraway asserts that she “would rather be a cyborg than a goddess,” (535), these texts continually assert that Barbie, and, by extension, the feminine ideal which she supports, would much rather be a goddess in the eyes of her admirers; desired, beautiful, and intellectually and creatively vacant.

Barbie imagery often centers on notions of commodification. Duhamel’s poem “Marriage” asserts that as Barbie sits on the store shelves “In her box, elastic bands hold back her arms / and the plastic overlay she peers through / distorts her view of the world” (20-22). These lines of poetry make clear the link between capitalist value and altered world-views, as Barbie waits to be snatched off the shelves but can never truly see clearly through the box that frames her. Placing value on gendered identity, then, blinds us to the “truth” of the world, and continually mars our perceptions of it. Aqua’s “Barbie Girl”

also gives primacy to notions of ownership and identification, as the lead female croons “You can touch, you can play / if you say, I’m always yours.” These texts speak of issues of feminine currency; just as Barbie flies off the shelves of the stores, the femininely acculturated woman strives to have the societal currency to make herself of “value” to the average male, and, indeed, to the world at large. Much of Barbie’s economic power comes from the way that she looks, the façade she puts forth, and the powerful “play” that can be thrust upon her. In a society of gendered hierarchy, these same themes emanate at numerous junctures, as the females who are often of the greatest economic worth (in terms of marketability and popular culture) often contain many of these same Barbiesque characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

As a model of gendered identity, Barbie represents a curious intersection of today’s rhetorical and political culture. Commentaries on Barbie highlight these dichotomous roles that she fulfills, as they point to the fullness of her figure in the same lines that they illustrate her bodily lack, as they make vague reference to the “everyday” appeal of Barbie in a world of those uniquely unable to meet her ideals of appearance, and as they suggest a cultural commodification of female gender embodied by a figure both perpetually emblematic of and logistically unable to retain the sexual currency that her flesh-and-blood sisters strive to preserve.

Through the use of textually-based rhetorical strategies inherent to poetry, Duhamel consistently reinforces and reevaluates notions of femininity in relation to

---

<sup>5</sup> In an October 2007 Forbes Magazine story, the top-selling tabloid weeklies are identified as featuring Jennifer Aniston on their cover, while Scarlett Johansson was named as the second most profitable female. Interestingly, both of these women are slender, blonde and very much reminiscent of Barbie in their appearance. Furthermore, as both women are actresses, the link to Barbie-like ideals becomes even more evident, as the job entitles them to “play a role” for the fulfillment of the viewer, in much the same way that Barbie becomes an object of “role-play” in both childhood pastime and cultural commentary. (“Fab Tab Cover Stars,” October 3, 2007)

Barbie. Asserting the complexity of the subject, Duhamel divulges the interiority of this plastic being, and the unrest that her place in society brings upon her. The text based poems discussed above encourage an introspective, exploratory reading of an imagined persona of the doll that has been in our consciousness for decades. Utilizing narrative techniques that allow the reader deeper insight into the thought processes and insights of the characters in her poems, Duhamel questions stereotypes of gender in society and gives voice to a doll unable to speak for herself, yet somehow acting as a mouthpiece for the vanity and sexual desires of the American public.

Duhamel's poetry, though focusing on a slightly "lowbrow" cultural artifact, engages in questions of gender and authority in some very highbrow ways. Intended for an audience equipped to handle such devices as dramatic irony, hyperbole, metaphor, enjambment, and metonymy, Duhamel's poetry engages in sophisticated arguments surrounding complex notions of a gendered society. As discussed above, Duhamel's textual methods of interrogation allow for the reader to construct her own imagined scene and thereby further these notions of created identity and the fictions of gender.

Aqua's music video also allows for a complex reevaluation of the terms with which we view Barbie and the subsequent notions that we hold of gender and sexuality. While a superficial viewing of the music video may lead one to conclude that this song and video are just one of several hundred music videos rendered in bubble-gum style and meant only to entertain, a more thorough analysis reveals that this text investigates many of the same questions that Duhamel's poems engage. While Duhamel's poems utilize a more scholarly manner of conversation to engage in gendered analysis, Aqua's video also

encourages sophisticated inspection of gender and identity, and engages the reader in a textual and visual experience that further accentuates the message.

The scenes that play across Aqua's video are often in accordance with the words



that the viewer hears, but occasionally stand in direct opposition to this audio text.

Furthermore, the tone of much of the auditory lyrics and the video allows for a sarcastic, ironic slant that the textual lyrics by themselves cannot maintain. Careful investigation suggests that "Barbie Girl" brings to the forefront some of the inconsistencies of our cultural understanding of women as a whole, and encourages an attentive viewer to question these discrepancies. With an audience of largely young, white, middle class spectators, the finer nuances of "Barbie Girl" may be lost on the majority of its viewers. Yet the message that Aqua conveys is such that, while many teenagers and fans of the

video may not immediately recognize the deeper allusions to gender in society, they might very well identify the irreverent tone of the video, and a prevailing message of the futility of Barbie-like ideals. As Mitchell asserts in her discussion of what pictures want, “the complex field of visual reciprocity is not merely a by-product of social reality but actively constitutive of it” (47). Thus, I hesitate to judge music videos too harshly in light of the intended audience, which may largely forget to look for the deeper message, but perhaps am inclined to judge instead the video audience in terms of how actively they engage the text to divulge a meaning beyond the easily accessible. In a manner divergent from the poetry discussed above, the video addresses concerns of gender in a refreshing and complex way, utilizing images that pop with color, standard gender tropes, and over-emphasized acting to call to light the artificiality of our ideals.

Barbie, as an exemplar of the model American woman, is a terribly confused, bored, vapid, and passive receptor of the wishes of others rather than her own autonomous person. The epigraph of this essay asserts that “There is no self” (Buddhist Barbie), to which Barbie agrees, though for differing reasons from Gautama. Barbie’s lack of self rests in her plastic, muted, form that must be given shape only through the imagination of others. She stands a model of American femininity, but to stand she must have another hold her up. Duhamel’s poetry gives voice to Barbie, expressing her confusion over her place in society, her sexuality, and her gendered being in a largely genderless body. Aqua’s video, in an equally compelling manner, calls our attention to the stereotypes to which we subscribe when we think of Barbie and gendered bodies, and allows us to watch the ridiculous unfolding of the scene that we secretly pine for. Both of these textual modes utilize a discourse of discovery and subversion, suggesting that

Barbie, and the women that she represents, are both questioning their place in society and waiting for others to give voice to that place.

## Works Cited:

“Aqua Triumphant in Barbie Girl Lawsuit, To Release Home Video in June.” *MTV.com*. May 18, 1998. MTV Networks. October 4, 2007. <<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1424988/19980518/story.jhtml>>.

McCourt, Tom and Nabeel Zuberi. “Music on Television.” *The Museum of Broadcast Communication Online*. The Museum of Broadcast Communication. October 3, 2007. <<http://museum.tv/archives/etv/M/htmlM/musiconatele/musiconatele.htm>>.

“Music Video.” *Wikipedia*. October 3, 2007. Wikimedia Foundation Incorporation. October 3, 2007. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music\\_video](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_video)>.

Rose, Lacey. “Fab Tab Cover Stars.” *Forbes.com*. October 02, 2007. Forbes Magazine. October 3, 2007. <[http://www.forbes.com/home/media/2007/10/02/celebrity\\_magazines-publishing-biz-media\\_cx\\_lr\\_1002coverstars.html](http://www.forbes.com/home/media/2007/10/02/celebrity_magazines-publishing-biz-media_cx_lr_1002coverstars.html)>.

Mitchell, W.J. T. *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Haraway, Donna. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” *The New Media Reader*. Ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003. 516-541.

Aqua. “Barbie Girl.” *YouTube*. May 30, 2006. Google. October 3, 2007. <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEzh10\\_xoqw&mode=related&search=>](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEzh10_xoqw&mode=related&search=>)>.

Duhamel, Denise. “Buddhist Barbie.” *Kinky*. Alexandria, VA: Orchises Press, 1997.

---. “Kinky.” *Kinky*. Alexandria, VA: Orchises Press, 1997.

---. “Marriage.” *Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001.

---. “One Afternoon When Barbie Wanted to Join the Military.” *The Star-Spangled Banner*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1999.

---. “Why Barbie and Ken Don’t Dress in Underwear.” *Kinky*. Alexandria, VA: Orchises Press, 1997.