

# Dressing made tangible: disability perspectives

Elizabeth Hayman  
University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

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## Introduction

This paper aims to offer some initial insight into the type of knowledge dress scholarship has to gain from drawing upon another academic field of study. Disability studies has emerged and become established as a scholarly discipline in the last three decades, with academic departments in many Western universities, most notably San Francisco State University's Institute on Disability and the Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Leeds, UK. My doctoral research is exploring the fertile, yet little explored, hybrid area that lies between disability studies and dress scholarship. Whilst 'disability' is used to describe a wide range of human life-states, including the psychological and the sensory, my work concentrates on the physical aspects understood and defined as 'disabled'. Valuable work has emerged within our field establishing the importance of approaching the dressed body as a 'fleshy', 'situated bodily practice' (Entwistle & Wilson, 2001; Entwistle, 2000), advancing theoretical engagement in this area and providing secure ground from which to extend exploration of the embodiment of dress. To this end, this paper intends to introduce some of the benefits of focusing on the very process that creates the dressed body: the act of dressing. This is a familiar, yet overlooked, arena in which to explore fundamental assumptions about what we believe dressed bodies to be. Processes of dressing and undressing remain under-theorised in our field and deserve our critical attention from perspectives usefully informed by knowledge of disability.

Dress scholarship is a field based in a range of intersecting materialities spanning textiles, bodies and geographies. The body continues to be a much-explored 'reified object of analysis', to paraphrase Bryan Turner (1996, p. xiii), with a range of disciplines now recognising bodies as

contested, complex, cultural sites (see Blackman, 2008, for a comprehensive review of approaches). Gaps exist in our stated knowledge between how we believe bodies manifest, interact and relate to dress, and how bodies actually undertake the series of complexities we commonly refer to as 'dressing'. In order to explore this, this paper will draw upon the ethnographic work I began in London in 2004 when I interviewed eight disabled people who had been independently selected for my research by a local branch of the disabled-run British Council of Disabled People. Interviewees spoke about their relationships with dress, with a surprisingly wide range of responses and issues. This initial fieldwork is being revisited in order to refine the focus of the interviews planned for later this year (2009) in Sydney.

### **Valuable knowledge hidden within the everyday**

Directing focus upon everyday acts of dressing and undressing can help to question how we have constructed what we believe bodies to entail, what we believe they consist of and what they have been made to mean. Much happens in the midst of this highly material interaction between physicality and cloth. The act of dressing and the act of undressing are both so habitual that, for most of us, they often disappear from conscious perception. There is much to learn by deliberately adjusting our focus to register what actually happens during dressing. By doing this, we render something so ubiquitous, so known, so guided by body memory and embedded by constant repetition into a phenomenon made usefully unfamiliar. This suspension of preconception allows space in which to examine what bodies actually do, moment-by-moment, during dressing and undressing and how these processes are affected and determined by social forces, both external and internal, within intimate settings.

Dressing is a consumption process complicated at every step by its constituent elements, which overlap, influence, impact and determine how the process proceeds. It consists of a multiplicity of decisions, choices and physical actions, both flowing and individually distinct, spliced with material, financial and cultural possibilities and determinants. Involving two materialities of very different substance, in constant juxtaposition, body and cloth can be thought to continue on with the dressing process each of us consciously put into place; finding their own pitch in crease, wrinkle and seam, renegotiating the material confines of a tight waistband or a strap pulled too tight for comfort.

### **Dressing differences**

Already complicated and complex, these dressing issues are brought into sharp perspective when they also involve disability. Our collective mindset, honed by longstanding social conditioning, has consistently rendered disability as a negativity. For most of us, disability remains an under-negotiated site of abjection and difficulty. Notwithstanding very real physical, psychological or emotional adversities (which are increasingly being re-acknowledged within disability studies), there are nonetheless, other ways of framing this. Disability presents us with inherently complex, highly diverse, yet surprisingly common, life experiences which provoke creative, questioning possibilities. Bodies, psychologies, senses and behaviour characteristics that exist outside our notions of 'the typical range' inherently challenge with their very difference. When faced with this difference, underlying assumptions about what we might conceive dressing to be – which feel fundamental to how we have constructed lived experience – can quickly lose relevance and become inadequate to the experience at hand.

Dress scholarship has much to gain by witnessing how dressing decisions, dressing strategies, routines and negotiations are undertaken during disability. There has been a limited and sometimes difficult history of dress-based knowledge having been used to 'solve' aspects of disability. I would like, instead, to approach dress clearly from the direction of disability. We need to develop ways to observe how disability can usefully defamiliarise what we think we know dressing to be. Instances where dressing happens differently, to account for, say, physical difference or different cognitive understanding of one type or another, can reveal deep-seated cultural expectations around how dressing is expected to manifest. By suspending these cultural expectations we can allow ourselves to witness the phenomenological realities of these unique and equally valid engagements with our material world and thereby reveal deeper structures at play. This has the potential to establish some new and challenging viewpoints on this human practice, which, in turn, can foster fresh research approaches, which my ongoing work intends to develop.

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### **Recognising users' experiences of dressing**

Much can be learned by turning to those who live with physical differences; those whose daily experience of dressing can be complicated

by the ways in which clothing is constructed, provisioned, accessed and assumed. The following material is gleaned from the previously mentioned sound-recorded oral history interviews, conducted in a variety of public and private London locations. Though all eight interviewees had much to say about their experiences of clothing – even those claiming disinterest in dress or fashion – it has been the finer, more understated micro-observations that have often carried the most significance. The following three examples illustrate how apparently small details are worth great attention in extracting the true impact of how disability can inform what we learn from witnessing dressing processes.

### **Case study 1: The political work of challenging typical dressing expectations**

When I met one of my interviewees, back in 2004, at his workplace in one of London's newly opened statement buildings, I noticed his suit jacket was slung over the back of his powered chair. This turned out to be a deliberate strategy, he revealed during our subsequent interview; a dressing tactic devised in response to some fairly testy debate with his employers about professionally acceptable physical appearance. Some time before our interview he had been confronted about his – he admitted – dishevelled appearance in his workplace in light of his highly public position. It was clear, from the tone with which he spoke about it, that, at some level, he had welcomed this debate. After all, it was a debate containing disability politics of great subtlety.

From a disability perspective, employer and public expectations of what status appropriate dress consists of – in this case, suit, silk tie and lace-up shoes – are tempered with little sense of what may be physically possible. My interviewee does not occupy a body that could easily interact with or operate wearing all of these standardised, recognised and required pieces of attire. Having discarded 'useless' (interview 04/05, 26 March 2004) shoes entirely, but adopting, instead, fine silk socks, dress shirts and ties, my interviewee further refined his politically savvy adaptive approach (see Snyder & Mitchell, 2006, p. 197) with the apparently casual slinging of an obviously expensive piece of jacket tailoring over his power-chair's backrest. Overall, it seemed resolution had appeared to have been achieved within a unique tension: clothing of appropriate status for his very public position was, indeed, being 'worn' by what amounted to an essential extension of his body. He

could, in theory, at any minute, have exploited this publicly visible potentiality by directing his 24-hour personal assistance – constantly accompanying and tending to him – to dress him in that jacket. But he had no intention of ever doing something as, for him, uncomfortable as this. Instead the unworn, yet very much used, jacket formed one of the many subtle solutions he employed to deal with this particular wrestle between pressing social and personal sartorial expectations.

As any online search for 'adaptive' clothing will demonstrate, there are various types of publicly available replacement or alternative clothing design aimed at disabled people. This is a deceptively complex arena that raises a range of reactions from those it is aimed towards. Adaptive clothing design, with its emphasis on function, seemingly creates, just as it solves, discomforts for many who live with social difference. Significantly, this interviewee chooses not to use adaptive clothing designs. Instead, his sophisticated engagement with his clothing demonstrates the creative potential that creative individual renegotiations make possible, even within narrow genres of commercially available dress. Good-fit, poor-fit or even the 'non-fit' of the power-chair 'worn' jacket: the point of his clothing choices is that all his clothing components could be interchangeable with another, just as capable, occupant of a similar social status of occupation. To be seen to wear alternative, 'adaptive' clothing would invite inappropriate attention to the body that the established 'grammar of male clothing' (Breward, 1999, p. 24) works so efficiently to disengage from. His personal and professional political work on this level is all the more powerful for the subtle level at which it works.

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### Case study 2: Dress complicating dressing

... oppression is not just about being on the receiving end of a tyrannical power. It is also effected through apparently liberal and 'humane' practices, including medicine, education, bureaucracy, leisure and consumer goods. (Foucault, 1977, in Barnes & Mercer, 2003, p. 21)

The standardised clothing production that we are all familiar with can form complications and, at worse, oppression for those who cannot interact with dressing as it is typically conceived. For many of us, dressing consists of sets of relatively fleeting, contained actions, learnt whilst young and thereafter largely overlooked. Practised and refined by perpetual use, dressing emerges as an ongoing, living archive of

unacknowledged knowledge. These highly specialised physical performances contain wealths of localised, specialised, cultural and personal information. Though owned by each of us, this corporeal and cultural knowledge is too private to have developed much in the way of spoken descriptive vocabulary. Intimate movements, secret ordering of clothing, first this then that, are hidden in a wordless void, whilst language has formed around the culture that we sanction to be made public.

Effecting effective assistance around dressing can be difficult to achieve, as many societies frame it in such private, intimate terms. Dressing is typically conceived as being a lone practice, performed upon the self by the self, confined within private or intimate settings. Clothing made to assumed configurations and sizes for remote consumption can create individual and private problems that are difficult to address without outside support. So much of our manufactured materiality impacts negatively upon people who cannot get along with its often standardised format, producing additional disability not necessarily innate to the original situation.

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One of my interviewees told me about the time she spent the night encased in the coat she had forgotten to ask her supportive, but already busy, daughter to take off before leaving earlier that day. Her situation was more than simply down to the wrong size of garment or the wrong type of fastenings, as so much of the small body of existing self-help literature appears concerned with. It was a significant moment for her, registered in the thoughtful pause in the sound recording. Clothing she had been familiar with before now no longer served her or supported her. In fact, it actively hindered what she wanted to achieve. Divorced from the dressing know-how she would have developed up until her accident and the dressing independence she had been so used to, this frustration seemed to be one of many failed dressing occasions that had contributed to her depression in the wake of the altered physical circumstances she was now living with.

Much of our daily dressing is underscored by skilled knowledge of how to repeatedly adapt to the pre-existing, widely available standardised clothing that most of us are confronted with in shops, catalogues and online. The implications are profound for those of us who find that mainstream clothing does not fit or operate in ways they do for other

people. If visual identity cannot be created from the same routes and resources as everyone else, what does that say for their deeper involvement and relevance within that society? The disability studies community has begun to explore how deep acceptance of disability within society and the rightful assumption of equal citizenship for disabled people can be compromised by underlying social and commercial structures that disrupt full and meaningful social belonging (Erevelles, 2002; Goggin & Newell, 2005; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006; Titchkosky, 2007). Elizabeth Wilson describes fashion as 'one among many forms of aesthetic creativity which make possible the exploration of alternatives' (Wilson, 2003, p. 245). Though the consequences of dressing may be intentionally public, challenging the ways in which dressing processes can impact is all the more difficult to achieve as it is framed so privately.

### **Case study 3: Creative resistance to imposed dressing regimes**

Another issue that arises out of dressing having been conceived of as a private or intimate practice is well illustrated by my third example drawn from the eight London interviews. We have seen with the last example how disability can reframe what is typically conceived as a lone, self-administered experience into one that involves another(s). This shift from private to more open involvement from outside, from lone to assisted, is often marked by the medicalisation that has historically characterised Western understanding of disability.

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A man of distinct panache, my third interviewee's frequent recourse to couture to maintain the extensive, flamboyant and diminutive-scale wardrobe he is so proud of stands in stark contrast to the medicalised, routine-bound way in which he is forced to create his dressed self. The way in which he dresses is largely determined by rushed local authority-provided homecare timetabling. Though incredibly gracious about it, he never quite knows when this assistance is coming to his home. In common with most others in the same position, he is not always sure, either, who exactly will be turning up to perform this intimate service. Any dressing requirements that fall outside the carer's visit are achieved with ingenuity, as well as a tolerance of the cold – he takes his specially tailored cape with him in his car to the local greengrocer, who dresses him before he continues on with his day.

### **Disrupting dressing assumptions**

There is much we can extrapolate from just these three dressing case studies. Dressing processes that occur in unique ways highlight how cultures tend to frame dressing as having usual ways of occurring. Dressing is a material chaos we have tamed to the point that it has been 'naturalised' and made to appear inherent to civilised behaviour. To play around with any of its established parameters is immediately odd – though extremely insightful. The humour contained in stories of how, say, children learn to dress themselves is dependent upon these very fractures. Acknowledging and then questioning assumptions that dressing occurs according to 'usual' patterns, in 'usual' locations, according to 'typical' timings, orders, conditions, etc. opens this fascinating process up to examination.

We could describe each of these instances as moments of disrupted dressing: the jacket strategically poised on the wheelchair, to be read for its potential to subscribe to conforming dressing actions; the unwieldy burden of a coat that crushes someone's sense of independence; and the cape that inadvertently fosters local community connections. These breaching moments expose the points at which generalised expectations of what dressing should be run out, become hazy, become problematised and begin to hint at other meanings.

Each of these instances exist both in relation to and aside from the three different methods of assisted dressing provision each of the interviewees depends upon: professional round-the-clock assistance publicly demonstrates an autonomous potentiality; reliance on a family member proves emotionally difficult to negotiate; the local authority provided drop-in homecare service is too time-bound to be sufficient. Disability can demonstrate to those of us who do not have knowledge of disability that it is possible for dressing to be practised in different ways. The myriad ways in which dressing can be disrupted or altered can spontaneously bracket or suspend what we might assume or envisage occurring during dressing, with potential to raise fundamental questions that go to the heart of what we look at in dress scholarship.

### **The significance of locating dressing within privacy**

The three examples of dressing given above all draw upon dressing with outerwear, yet we are all aware that the public result of dressing



originates within privacy. We typically locate our various interactions with clothing within varying degrees of seclusion. Our use of clothing to control how we selectively conceal, reveal and create self is deeply embedded within Western cultures. Desire for privacy has come to determine the architecture of our living spaces, determine the way we conduct fundamental human states such as sleep, how we organise financial resources, belongings and information about how we are to be known. Privacy is reflected within the margins where our language about dressing runs thin, finding minimal status within a public discourse more prepared to discuss privacy in terms of legal human rights. Dressing can be a privacy renegotiated into intimacy, it can be something precious, to be violated or preserved. Bound up with issues of 'respect for individual autonomy and dignity' (Solove, 2008, p. 86), alongside disability and processes of dressing, issues of privacy – which have also largely escaped attention within dress scholarship – form the third aspect in this paper.

Dressing, it seems, involves multiple layers of privacy. Solove (2008, p. 52) sites the body as 'being at the core of privacy', determined and regulated by issues of concealment, selective secrecy, touching and contact, 'individual control and dominion over decisions regarding one's body' (Solove, 2008, p. 53). This sense of corporeal privacy is deepened by dressing's usual cultural location within the home, and other temporary domestic equivalents. These private geographies offer a haven and a space where contemplation and creation of the self is made possible away from the gaze and surveillance of others

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Assisted dressing, beyond childhood, breaches these expectations. The presence of another within this private sphere can have profound impact on this already complex area. Transgressions of privacy may be granted voluntarily for numerous reasons involving strategic sacrifice for specific gain. Whilst this might be thought of more typically in terms of fostering intimacy or permitting sexual encounter, these strategically given moments of vulnerability mark out negotiations between disability and dressing support; activity overlooked, yet escaping concealment. Outerwear to underwear, it is clear that dressing is framed by grades of differing privacy requirements; all of which are at risk during assisted dressing.

Private moments marked out by another's timings and agendas raise implications around dependency and independence, issues which go to the core of how we construct our notions of citizenship. As Ingun Grimstad Klepp so aptly states, 'clothes studies can contribute to clarifying the unwritten norms that regulate our lives and contribute towards showing which ideologies and power structures form the bases of these norms' (2007, p. 271). Maintaining a politicised view on what happens during assisted dressing processes allows for some profound underlying structures to be deeply questioned. 'Othering' processes, which continue to frame disability in Western societies, retain their persistent, eugenic legacy with its roots in the Enlightenment turn to the scientific. Sweeping assumptions determining contemporary notions of civic fitness are still evident within what has been reported as the 'infantilising' (interview 04/10, 26 June 2004) and overly-functional aspects that have been associated with the type of dress imposed upon this sector of 'Overlooked Consumers' (Women With Disabilities Australia, 2007, p. 10). Privacy plays a fragile yet vital role in providing the means by which identities may be formed, compromised or violated. There is much that greater understanding of this aspect of identity formation can contribute to ongoing disabled citizenship advocacy.

My work is located beyond any assumption of what 'bodies' may be. By rejecting simplified, standardised conceptualisations of how human beings manifest, I am finding rich and chaotic challenge for dress scholarship. This paper has deliberately exposed the inherent complexity of the seemingly everyday, habitual process of dressing by viewing it through disability and 'crip' (McRuer, 2006) perspectives. These disability/crip outsider insights have the ability to expose a number of strategically concealed social knowledges, beliefs and values that have evolved around accepted dressing practices. Vital for both dress scholarship and disability studies in subtly profound ways, this paper demonstrates a number of issues raised by dressing differences that powerfully question core assumptions and deserve further research. These include: developing understandings of how deeply held assumptions around privacy as the ideal location of dressing can disrupt or support identity formation and fully recognised citizenship; and, exploration of how clothing production can be implicated as an oppressive practice, simply by its reliance upon assumed standardised shaping.

configuration and sizing. We need to find ways in which to witness the powerful nuances proposed by the live, thinking materiality of bodies continually 'being reconstituted in each moment of engagement' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 297) and their material interactions with clothing. A broader understanding of the mutual impact and interplay between material, time-bound corporeality and the potential that dress offers is needed to deepen our understanding of what dressing – this process of enacting appearance – means. Deeply set and socially comfortable parameters hold and contain much of our understandings of how corporeality presents and is made tangible, how it affects and is affected. It is only by disturbing these parameters to our understandings of what bodies are can dress scholarship be usefully expanded to encompass the differences that have been framed as 'disability'.

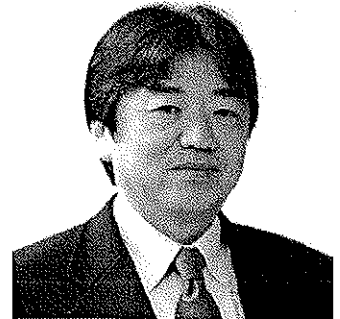
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# Preface

**Dr. Satoshi Onuma**  
**Bunka Fashion College, Japan**



The International Foundation of Fashion Technology Institutes (IFFTI) was founded in 1999, the brain child of individuals representing four fashion institutions, Fashion Institute of Technology, New York; National Institute of Fashion Technology, India; Institut Francais de la Mode, Paris and Nottingham Trent University, UK, who had identified the need for a framework of cooperation and collaboration in the wake of the liberalization of global trade in fashion and textiles. They invited other leading fashion institutions from across the world to a meeting in Delhi in 1998 and created IFFTI.

IFFTI was founded with the explicit purpose of building a global network of world renowned, like-minded institutions that were committed to the advancement of fashion education through the integration of design, technology and business. IFFTI aims to serve as an international forum for the exchange of ideas and research, to promote the interests of fashion students, and to foster the development of the global fashion industry. London College of Fashion, UK was one of those leading fashion institutions invited to join IFFTI in 1998.

IFFTI Conferences not only offer IFFTI members the opportunity to get together to exchange ideas, share research and discuss key issues for the fashion industry, it also gives them the chance to experience the fashion education and the fashion industry in the host country. For delegates from the host country there is the opportunity to hear from and to engage with speakers and participants from across the world. The 11th IFFTI Annual Conference hosted by London College of Fashion, UK was no exception. This hugely successful Conference attracted over 200 delegates from 16 Countries.

In the present era, fashion education needs to keep pace with the worldwide phenomenon of globalization. As recently as 50-60 years ago, the apparel industry was domestically orientated and business was primarily conducted regionally. However, this is no longer the case. The apparel industry in the 21st Century now extends across national borders, and businesses no longer face the restrictions and limitations they once encountered. Today, the creative minds across countries must understand each other and share their style of working. This will be to their mutual advantage. Their individual aspirations must be fulfilled within the emerging global environment. Therefore, I believe that excellence in fashion education can only be achieved through collaboration and the exchange of expertise. This will help industry and fashion education to become more vibrant and global.

Similarly, the environment is also changing. A few decades ago environmental issues such as urban pollution were only considered issues of concern for individual countries. But as industry globalizes, environmental problems become worldwide issues which influence the greater global fashion community.

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Even though there are more than 200 countries and regions in the world, it is important to overcome national borders and distance to manage issues that will affect the world in future. The aspect of sustainability in the fashion industry needs to be addressed urgently. I believe that IFFTI can play a vital role in achieving this goal for the fashion industry.

This years Conference theme "Fashion and Well-Being?" and the related sub- themes: Identity, Sustainability, Health, Ethics, Designing the future, Technology and Retail reflected the growing concern of consumers and producers with ethical, sustainability and health issues attempted to do just that. Fifty five presentations from researchers, practitioners, educationists and post graduate students, addressed variety of research directions from the way colours we wear can effect our health, design for ageing and wellbeing, to green retailing and engaging with sustainability through design. One hundred and fifty one abstracts and ninety one full papers were received. The Conference papers were double – blind reviewed at both the abstract and full paper submission stages. At each stage, the reviewers provided detailed

feedback to potential presenters. The fifty-five papers presented at the Conference are published in this volume.

In addition to the presentation of the papers, particular highlights of the Conference were: -

- Keynote speech by Professor Frances Corner, Head of London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, who welcomed the delegates to the Conference and provided an overview of the theme of the Conference.
- Address by Harold Tillman, Fashion entrepreneur and LCF alumnus and Chairperson of the British Fashion Council, who provided an overview on retail industry and associated trades.
- Address by Caryn Franklin, Writer and Broadcaster, who provided the insight into the importance of media to the fashion industry.
- Presentation by Boudicca, The London-based Design Company and London College of Fashion's Designers in Residence, provided an insight into the intimate, emotional relation between garments and their wearers.
- A Panel Discussion on "Environment" which was ingeniously planned through interactive sessions and was led by Ms. Wendy Malem, London College of Fashion.
- A Panel Discussion on "Positive Visualizations of Beauty" with presentations by Coroline Cox, Fashion Historian, Irene Shelley, Editor of Black Beauty and Hair Magazine and Anna – Marie Solowij, Freelance Beauty Writer.
- Visit to the Fashion Gallery at London College of Fashion, UK, where Judith Clarke gave a short talk on Neo – Couture Exhibition followed by viewing of the innovative display at the Gallery.
- Presentation by Professor Christopher Breward, Acting Head of Research at the Victoria and Albert Museum and a Professor of London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, who gave an interesting account of the history and theory of fashion and its relationship to urban cultures.

- Presentation by Dame Rosalind Savill, Director of Wallace Collection on the history of Wallace Collection. This was followed by a visit to the Wallace Collection which is a national museum in an historic London town house. Within the 25 galleries were unsurpassed displays of French 18th century paintings, furniture and porcelain with superb Old Master paintings and a world class armoury. The Collection has been used as a source of inspiration by fashion designers such as Vivienne Westwood.

In addition, 5 Junior Faculty and 3 Researchers were sponsored by IFFTI to present papers at the Conference as part of IFFTI initiatives. These initiatives, which are designed to support faculty at the beginning of their research careers gave them an opportunity to present a paper at an International Conference and be published in this collection of paper.

A design competition for students of IFFTI member institutions was also conducted by London College of Fashion, UK. IFFTI sponsored an award for the winner of the competition.

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I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of IFFTI, to thank those who made the Conference such a success. I would like to express our sincere thanks to Prof. Helen Thomas, Research Director, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London and Convenor of the Conference. In particular, we would like to thank the members of IFFTI 2009 Organizing Committee, Wendy Malem, Marie Stanley, Anna Millhouse, Betty Woessner, Prema Muniandy, Paul Moore and Jennifer Ray. Additional thanks to Commodore Vijay Chaturvedi (Retd.), Secretary, IFFTI.

One final note, a very special thank you to Prof. Frances Corner, Head of London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London for her complete support, commitment and encouragement to this Conference.

Dr. Satoshi Onuma

President, Bunka Fashion College,

Vice Chairman, Bunka Gakuen Education Foundation, and

Chair of IFFTI



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