

***Disneyization of Davao City's Public Spaces:  
The Myth and Amusement in Kublai Millan's Not-So-Indigenous Sculptures***

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the relationship between the role of Davao-based artist Kublai Millan's gigantic art sculptures and the Disneyization of the public spaces in Davao City. This paper further argues how the sculptures were considered as authentic representations of indigenous peoples and cultures in the city, as well as depictions of nationalism, indigeneity and visual ethnography. Ten public spaces around Davao City which are limited to parks, monuments and resorts that integrate the sculptures of Davao-based artist Kublai Millan serve as case studies. Ocular survey and on-site interviews are conducted to help in the assessment of these public spaces and the sculptures. Analytical interpretations of two theoretical frameworks by social researcher Alan Bryman's *Disneyization of Society* which offers insights into what park visitors to public spaces are experiencing, and political scientist Benedict Anderson's "nation" as an "imagined" community are utilized to evaluate Kublai Millan's sculptures in relation to the elements that comprise Disneyization, symbols of Philippine nationalism, and indigeneity in Mindanao.

The findings of this paper indicate that Disneyization has not completely infiltrated Davao City's public spaces based on the principles and stipulations theorized by Bryman and to the degree that the Disney brand has become synonymous with American consumerism. The findings also suggest that since Davao City commissioned these sculptures, Kublai Millan as a brand himself, symbolizes the city. More research about preservation of authenticity and prevention against commodification of Davao City's indigenous peoples and cultures are needed to educate the people about their significance in society.

Keywords: Disneyization, Indigeneity, National identity, Public spaces, Davao art

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## Introduction

Through the years, the word Disney became synonymous not exclusively to Disneyland but to theme parks in general, as well as animation in films and television, musicals and movie soundtracks, and specialty merchandising among others which evidently made Disney the “dominant player among the entertainment giants” (Hannigan, 1998, p.104). It became the template for the development and popularity of manufactured and themed environments in the United States and other parts of the world such as *Disneyland*, *Legoland* and *Universal Studios Theme Parks and Resort*. So, what is Disneyization?

Alan Bryman (2004), a professor of Organizational and Social Research at the University of Leicester, England defines this format as “the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (p.5). The idea of Disneyization is meant to draw attention to the spread of “principles” demonstrated by the Disney theme park, a public space that aims to discard harsh realities and is packaged into a clean, family-oriented form of entertainment (p.4).

Stating that Disneyization is noticeable in the public spaces of Davao City, a metropolis in the south of the Philippines with a total land area of 2,243.61 sq.km., is an exaggeration because these public spaces are not categorized as amusement park with mechanical rides and performative entertainment played daily, and with food kiosks and merchandise stores on every corner. But then again there are touches of the Disney theme parks in Davao’s public spaces, particularly with the sculptures of Davao-based artist Kublai Millan that lead one to think of happiness and entertainment, and draw the park goers to further experience them. However, Disneyization is not merely turning a public space into an environment that overflows with happiness and escapism; it is a social and critical analyses of the Disney brand and its association to consumption of goods and services. Bryman (2004) claims that Disneyization is about consumption and the enticement to consume more than the basic needs necessary for physical well-being (p.4).

Kublai Millan’s sculptures, when viewed individually, seek to provide a specific knowledge of either cultural and historical significance or supernatural fantasies. But when placed in a manufactured environment, such as public parks and resorts which cater to relaxation and escapism from troubles and problems, they present a different experience. Thus, by installing Kublai Millan’s sculptures in a manufactured and themed public environment, the actuality of being indigenous becomes commodified and commercialized, furthering the development and global identification of Davao City as a tourist destination.

The overall objective of this paper is to understand the degree to which Kublai Millan’s sculptures installed in Davao City’s public spaces parallel the Disney theme park experience, and the influences and symbolism of nationalism and indigeneity in these sculptures. The paper further analyzes how these sculptures were considered as authentic representations of Davao’s history and diverse peoples, as well as depictions of nationalism and indigeneity.

Two theoretical frameworks are used to critique Kublai Millan’s sculptures. First, Alan Bryman’s theoretical framework about “Disneyization” discussed in his work *Disneyization of Society* is used to evaluate the extent to which the public spaces in Davao City have been standardized using the format and principles that are distinctly based on the Disney theme parks. Second, the theoretical framework by Benedict Anderson about the “nation” as an “imagined” community as discussed in his work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*<sup>1</sup> is used to evaluate Philippine nationalism and indigeneity into Kublai Millan’s sculptures.

Qualitative research approach through critical and analytical syntheses and evaluation of the sculptures’ meaning and symbolism was used. Ocular survey and on-site interviews are also conducted to help in the assessment and evaluation. The sculptures of Kublai Millan are extensive and are located in various cities and municipalities in Mindanao, the second largest island of the Philippines. However, this paper is limited to using ten public spaces in Davao City which integrate the sculptures of Kublai Millan as case studies. These ten public spaces (see Figure 1) are: 1) the Commemorative Monument of Peace and Unity in front of Davao City Hall; 2) the Durian Monument in the Francisco Bangoy International Airport; 3) Davao’s People’s Park; 4) Ponce Suites and Townhouses; 5) the Monument located along the highway in Marilog District; 6) a privately-owned resort known as the Gumamela Caverock Farm Resort; 7) the Philippine-Japan Friendship Monument; and, the three Welcome Landmarks located in the three entry points to Davao City, namely: 8) the “*Durian and Kalabaw*” in Toril District; 9) the “*King of Philippine Skies*” in Marilog District; and, 10) the “*Waling-waling*” orchid in Lasang District.

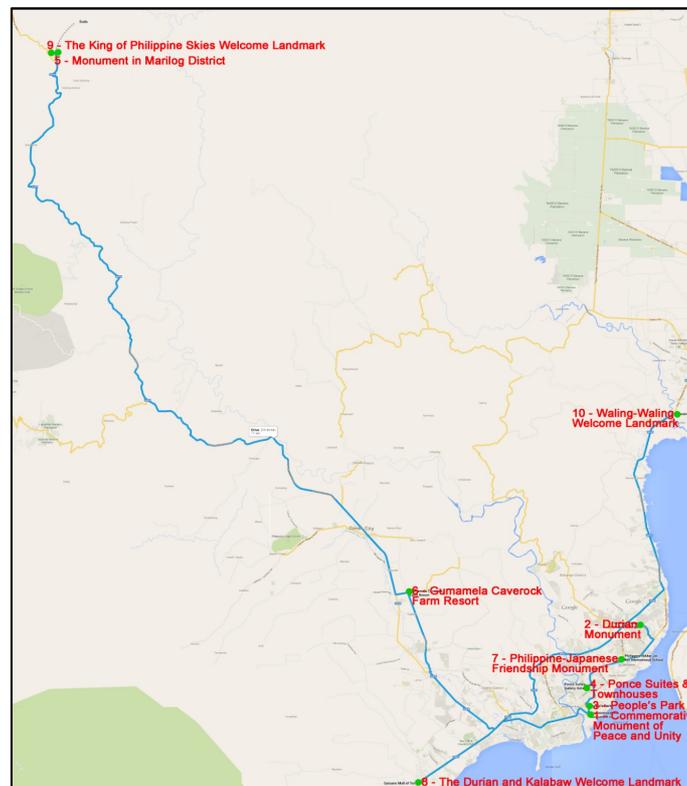


Figure 1: Google Maps. (2014). *Davao City map* [Edited digital image].<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The term “imagined” is used throughout the paper as a statement reflecting Anderson’s (1991) theory (p.6).

<sup>2</sup> The map was edited to indicate the ten public spaces in Davao City used as case studies in this paper.

## Disneyization Vis-à-vis Kublai Millan's Sculptures

Disneyization comprises four central elements – theming, hybrid consumption, merchandising, and performative labor.

**Theming.** The first central element, theming, is the consistency of meaning and symbolism given to a location or environment by the application of a central narrative or a focal story (Bryman, p.15) such as the use of folk art and indigenous ornamentation in modern design. Scott A. Lukas, a cultural anthropologist and tenured professor from Lake Tahoe Community College, in his article “From Themed Space to Lifespace” pointed out that Disney’s true focus of theming is not historical and cultural accuracy in their products, but it is “heightened reality” focused on the people’s emotional attachments towards people, place and culture (The Disney Imagineers (2005) as cited in Lukas, 2010, p.137).

In the case of Kublai Millan, he used narratives of historical and cultural experiences specific to Davao City and its diverse peoples and cultures to convey knowledge and entertainment. The sculptures around Davao City are easily identifiable as Kublai Millan’s via the consistent usage of massive scale, his sense of sculptural aesthetics, in some cases exhibiting unusual proportions through large heads with small cherub-like bodies, and are painted colorfully. Most of the sculptures exhibit huge grins with exaggerated and animated features; wear tribal and traditional costumes; and show everyday activities like farming, gathering food, playing musical instruments, dancing, amongst others (see Figure 2). These depictions are stripped of the human frailty and harsh realities of everyday living, of hardships and squalid existence, resembling a sanitized and almost perfect depiction of life, hence, *Disneyized*<sup>3</sup> and not ultimately a good form for factual knowledge.



Figure 2: Fortinez, J.E. (2013). *Indigenous people sculptures, Davao City* [photograph].

In reality, the indigenous peoples wear their tribal costumes only during rituals and festivals, and in some cases, in the presence of foreigners (see Figure 3). Kublai Millan’s sculptures received much attention due to their resemblance to cartoon characters, recognition of the tribal costumes, and their easy access through public spaces. Landscape architect and Professor Helen Armstrong (2001) in a journal article about spectacle and tourism and its significance to cultural landscapes pointed out that

<sup>3</sup> Bryman (2004) first mentioned the term “Disneyized” in page vii. However, Bryman did not define the term. But based on its usage, “Disneyized,” a verb form of Disneyization, is the spread of principles demonstrated by the Disney theme parks, and the incorporation of consumption.

“the town becomes the destination and its local heritage, the resource” (p.14). This becomes the case for Davao City’s manufactured and themed environment. The public spaces become the destination and Kublai Millan’s gigantic sculptures which are embedded in the landscape become the resource.



Figure 3: Fortinez, J.E. (2014). *Remembering*, Cotabato [photograph].

Out of the ten public spaces where Kublai Millan’s sculptures are showcased, People’s Park seems to symbolize or perpetuate Bryman’s concept of Disneyization as a public space in Davao City. Theming is the most obvious Disneyization element with its use of a distinct look and art style that distinguishes it as a Kublai Millan work. Theming is also shown in indigeneity as the subject. It can be argued, though, that Kublai Millan’s depictions of indigeneity and history are well intentioned yet show a mere superficial acknowledgement and sanitized versions of the people and their cultures. Cases in point are the Commemorative Monument of Peace and Unity and the Philippine-Japan Friendship Monument wherein historical theming is involved through the authentic yet sanitized history eliminating the harshness of colonization and terrors of the war.

The theming of indigeneity also showcases the good elements of the tribal life minus the dissatisfaction and marginalization they have been encountering since they have been dispossessed of their ancestral lands, in the same manner that Disney has taken the frightening elements out of the fairy tales. Case in point is the 1995 Disney movie *Pocahontas* which ended with the Native Americans and the colonists peacefully existing, whereas the reality is harsher and gloomier.

In addition, Bryman (2004) points out that theming occurs when a place is themed in terms of its “association with well-known or striking products or events” (p.44). The city government specifically employed thematic symbols to represent Davao, such as the durian, the *waling-waling* orchid, and the Philippine eagle in the welcome landmarks strategically placed at various entrance routes to the city (See Figure 4). Davao City Investment and Promotion Center Chief Jason Magnaye stated that the welcome landmarks have become a destination and give people the idea that they are in Davao City. He further said that “it’s a branding thing for Davao City” (Casas, 2014).



Figure 4: Fortinez, J.E. (2014). *The welcome landmarks, Davao City* [photograph].

**Hybrid consumption.** The second central element, hybrid consumption, is a type of consumption that cannot be categorized in a traditional marketing setting which involves a consumer who buys both “cheap generics and low-end brands” and “premium, high-end brands” in diverse occasions (Leppänen & Grönroos, 2009, p.1). The goal of hybrid consumption is to get the people to stay longer in the manufactured environment to maximize opportunities through spending and shopping (Bryman, p.58). There are no commercial establishments and food, novelty items or souvenir vendors inside the People’s Park, one of the case studies, which means hybrid consumption is not totally present. Furthermore, vendors are located outside the gates and independent from the park management, and instead the park goers bring their own food. However, if one limits hybrid consumption to its premise of prolonging the enjoyment of the park, then hybrid consumption is in effect because Davao’s public spaces, specifically People’s Park is a haven at the heart of the city where one can relax.

The local government gains no direct monetary profit from what they commissioned Kublai Millan to create. However, the city government gains income elsewhere through business and services tourists provide to hotels, restaurants, shopping malls, *pasalubong* or souvenir centers and other business establishments in the city, which in itself is very Disneyland. Hence, it conveys Disneyization. In addition, visitors’ satisfaction, appreciation, and free advertisements through local media networks and social media platforms contribute to how the city profits. Conversely, souvenir shop owners and tribal community near the landmarks are encouraged by the city government to increase tourism development and local income by selling their own products such as handmade jewelry to local tourists who take photographs of the landmarks and the landscape (Casas, 2014).

**Merchandising.** The third central element merchandising is “the promotion of goods in the form of or bearing copyright images and logos, including such products made under license” (Bryman, p.79). Bryman further states that it is “a form of franchising, in the sense that it is a mechanism for leveraging additional uses and value out of existing well-known images.” The look and style of Kublai Millan’s large-scaled sculptures are distinct and one can easily distinguish a Kublai Millan from a non-Kublai Millan. However, the use of the indigenous people as models in sculptures displayed in parks and resorts show a merchandising scheme that caters to stereotyping and racial distinction for someone else’s profit or to the benefit of the government and tourism industry, as well as a branding for Kublai Millan.

Kublai Millan has been spreading his brand name and trademark by venturing outside of Davao City and creating sculptures in a number of neighboring provinces such as Bukidnon, South Cotabato, Davao Oriental and Davao del Sur. His creations in these different locations vary in the kind of indigenous people used or the cultural ornamentations and symbolisms used, but his brand and trademark of massive-scaled sculptures with enormous heads disproportionate to small bodies, and exaggerated and animated expressions are prevalent and distinct.

**Performative labor.** The fourth and last central element, performative labor, refers to the type of emotional management and theatrical performances required of employees, particularly of those in the service industry (Bryman, p.103). Bryman believes that the reason that emotional labor is a big part in the Disney service work is that the “style and quality of the delivery of a service are crucial to how it is perceived”<sup>4</sup> (p.105). Thus, the Disney experience becomes the merchandise with the ultimate goal of customer satisfaction to gain repeat business.

In most of the public spaces where Kublai Millan’s works are installed, performance, in terms of an employee’s emotional engagement with the viewer or park goer is not a part of the attraction. There are no versions of Disney Main Street parades nor park employees as costume players. However, performative labor can also be applied to tour guides, through walking tours, who use animated communication skills with interactive and factual information about the park, the sculptures, the artist, the cultures and the people that these sculpture represent. Unfortunately, this type of performative labor is absent in any of the ten public spaces. Its presence could have provided a better and real understanding of the cultures of Davao City through the sculptures, as well as give job opportunities for the locals with communications and tourism educational backgrounds.

The sculptures themselves could be considered as a form of performative labor in terms of how the sculptures influence performative behavior, if not performative labor. The author observed that park visitors when being photographed imitate the movements and facial expressions of the statues. This imitation of the movements and facial expressions is enjoyable if done with innocent fun, but it might be perceived as mocking and disrespectful especially if done consciously and derogatively.

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<sup>4</sup> Bryman pointed out that “performative labor” has a slightly broader meaning compared to “emotional labor” which he initially used in early publication of his book (p.13).

## Nationalism and Indigeneity Vis-à-vis Themed and “Imagined” Davao City

Kublai Millan's sculptures seen in the public spaces in Davao City and the surrounding provinces depict the various cultures of Mindanao, as well as its history and lifestyle. The sculptures also showcased national symbols of the Philippines such as the Philippine eagle and *waling-waling* orchid – symbols that represent Philippine traditions and ideals and convey the principles of sovereignty and national solidarity (RA 8491 Sec.2). The presence of such national symbols in the sculptures is a definite indication of the existence of nationalistic ideas and inclination to unite a culturally diversified city and the Mindanao island, at large. However, the country has a number of national symbols, both official and unofficial, with origins not so endemic to the country. Most of the declarations of these national symbols were made during the American occupation and were institutionalized by the American colonists who wanted a Philippine nation that resembles their own country. This implies that some of the national symbols known to Filipinos are not unique to the country, but have a widespread popularity in other parts of the world. How does an object become a symbolism of nationalism, when that object is not exclusive to that country but in fact originates from and is abundant in other places?

Take the Philippine eagle (*Pithecophaga jefferyi*), for instance. The Philippine eagle became an official national symbol upon the declaration of Pres. Fidel V. Ramos through Proclamation No. 615 s.1995. Previously called the monkey-eating eagle due to its diet consisting of monkeys, the Philippine eagle is an endangered species unique to the Philippines and is considered as a “national treasure” and a “source of national pride” (Proclamation No.615). However, this is a national symbol that is not exclusive to the country. The Philippine eagle, the species, might be unique to the country, but the imagery or representation of the eagle is not. In fact, the bald eagle of the United States is part of the coat of arms of the Philippines as symbols of American colonialism. Together with the United States of America, a number of countries such as Mexico and Austria, have also used the eagle in their coat of arms in varying styles of representations and meaning. The eagle also has a historical background such as Napoleon I’s Roman Golden Eagle as the symbol of his new French empire, and the ancient Roman’s use of the eagle imagery as a prominent symbol especially as a standard of a Roman legion.

What makes the viewers recognize Kublai Millan’s huge representations of an eagle (see Figure 5) as the Philippine eagle and not the American eagle? Kublai Millan’s usage of the imagery of the Philippine eagle is a manifestation of the iconographic relevance the Philippine eagle has to Davao City where it is not only endemic but it is also where artificial breeding is conducted at the Philippine Eagle Center. To an untrained eye, all imagery and representations of an eagle is one and the same.



Figure 5: Fortinez, J.E. (2014). *Philippine Eagles*, Davao City [photograph]. Eagle sculpture at People's Park (upper left), eagle sculpture at Ponce Suites (lower left), and the King of the Philippine Skies welcome landmark (right).

The concepts of nationalism and national identity are constructed by post-colonial politics to create an “imagined” environment that fulfills in unifying an otherwise diverse people who has collectively experienced colonialism. The concepts of nationalism and national identity are also complex because it is impossible for the entire Filipino population to know each other. Although the concept of a nation is vague and theoretical, its existence is something that the Filipino people take for granted because it refers to a particular type of memory that is inculcated upon us at an early age. The people are obligated to have this sense of nationalism because the people are all a part of the state (David, 2002, p.3). Filipino professor of Sociology, Randolph S. David (2002) states that “history is seen as a tool with which to write and rewrite a memory for a people who are constantly reflecting on the ways to achieve nationhood” (p.5). With symbolic forms of nationalism, which in retrospect will deduce as not uniquely exclusive to a specific place, it is no wonder that some historians and theorists view the Filipino nation as an “imagined” community.

The presence of such symbolisms bear out the contention that the nation is a community that is socially constructed or “imagined,” a theory by Benedict Anderson (1991), a political scientist and Professor Emeritus of International Studies at Cornell University. He stated:

“I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p.6).

In a city with a population of 2.26 million as of the 2010 census, it is indeed farfetched for every Davaoeño (residents of Davao) to know each of their fellow Davaoeños, or meet each one or a portion of them, or even hear of them unless one is a local celebrity. Yet in the Davaoeños' minds are the notion that there is one pulse that beats in each one of them and every Davaoeño's heart, regardless of whether he or she is of indigenous origins, the Islamic faith, descendants of migrant settlers, or an expatriate who calls the city their "home."

Based on this theory, it can be concluded that Kublai Millan's sculptures cater to the standard symbolisms depicting national identity and indigeneity, but remains an "imagined" community because what is perceived and used as national identity could simply be identified as regional identity, and what is recognized as indigeneity could lead to commodification, stereotypes and marginalization.

### **Themed and "Imagined" Davao City Vis-à-vis Natural Indigenous Communities**

People take pictures with and of Kublai Millan's artworks as their way of showing their art appreciation for the gigantic sculptures as well as the diverse cultures of Davao City. The experience and the pictures taken are shared with friends through word-of-mouth, photographic reproductions or social media. Mass communication serves as the disseminator of these Kublai Millan's images and park experience that "ultimately become the community's collective memory" (David, 2002, p.7). This statement by David is a reflection of a statement by M. P. Maruya, a technical assistant of the City Tourism Operations Office, who stated that Kublai Millan's sculptures do not need promotion by the tourism office because the narratives in the sculptures already convey what Davao is, and the art style alone already expresses that it is a Kublai Millan (personal communication, May 19, 2014). Thus, through memory and recognition of the art style, promotion is done by the people and not by those who commissioned the sculptures. Relph pointed out that the values people attribute to places and objects are "related to their level of empathy with such places" and objects (as cited in Armstrong, 2001, p.16).

What Kublai Millan did is bring the various cultures in the city in a manufactured and themed space, and can be experienced at any convenient time with no outward expenditure except one's time and money for fare or fuel. His sculptures made a product out of indigeneity which the people accept because it conveys what Davao is or at least an "imagined" Davao and its people. They think that they are getting this opportunity to experience Davao's varied cultures in their natural environment but they are actually experiencing them in a manufactured space, a *Disneyized* public space. It is Disneyization because what is seen in the manufactured space is merely a representation of the authentic community, a trivialized version displaying Davao's indigenous people and their culture. Whereas, the authentic community is somewhere in the high grounds of Mount Apo or the surrounding mountains, inaccessible in an instant, and might employ the harsh realities of real living.

The park becomes the destination and its local heritage, via the sculptures relatively entrenched in the park, are the resource. This point is a reiteration of Armstrong's point that "the town becomes the destination and its local heritage, the resource." So, does the park affect authenticity? It could be a no, because it is in a manufactured environment, a themed public space that the park visitors hopefully perceive as not

the natural landscape from which these indigenous symbolisms originate from. It could also be a yes, because it sets the park visitors' mindset. It draws a story of what is an indigenous people. The manufactured environment becomes a safer environment to enjoy national symbolism and a false sense of indigeneity. This manufactured environment which Hannigan (1998) termed as "quasi-streets" might be inauthentic, but he also pointed out that they "provide comfortable and convenient 'sites of social centrality where people can interact lightly in crowds without too much hinging on the outcome'" (p.70). Thus, if one wants authenticity then one should experience and explore the culture in its natural environment through community immersion and observation (See Figure 6).



Figure 6: Fortinez, J.E. (2013-2014). *The Manobos of North Cotabato* [photograph].

## Conclusion

Kublai Millan's representations of Davao's indigenous peoples and their cultures are exaggerated in the most of his sculptures with an intension to get noticed and make an impression. While it is true that his sculptures represent indigenous cultural identity, acknowledging the indigenous peoples' existence and how they contribute to society and history, they can also be seen as stereotypes. Such stereotypes are either seen negatively wherein one can see and imagine a unified look for an otherwise diversified culture, thus, eliminating individuality and uniqueness, or it can be seen positively wherein one can see and imagine a united front. Such sculptures can also concretize that the images they portray are how the indigenous peoples look and act at all times. In addition, Kublai Millan is a brand that is identifiable almost in the same context as the Davao icons – the durian, Philippine eagle, and *waling-waling*. His brand becomes a symbolism of local and cultural identity in the same manner as the Philippine map. The map-as-logo, as stated by Anderson (1991), was instantly recognizable and visibly identifiable everywhere, thus, it "penetrated deep into the popular imagination, forming a powerful emblem" (p.175).

A significant factor about the presence of Kublai Millan's sculptures is not just art appreciation or if their symbolisms are authentic and true, but that the sculptures have opened the eyes of the public to the local culture and art scene which conveys that art is not just for museums but is meant to be experienced by all types of people. As Davao-based artist and college art instructor Rogelito D. Cayas, Jr. (n.d.) divulges in a Sun Star newspaper article: "We need local spaces for art visibility for in visibility everything follows, while the challenge is to sustain visibility in various efforts."

Art visibility is not limited to spaces, though. It also means that other artists should also flourish in the community. Kublai Millan's "tested and proven" image does not mean monopoly, and should not be the determining factor and limitation in commissioning artworks by other local artists. The city government should create opportunities for potential artists to also shine and be recognized, thus projects should not be tunneled to a "lone artist" but should be open for possibilities outside what is "tested and proven" (Maruya, 2014). By creating opportunities, an escape from a Disneyized Davao City can be achieved. But is a Disneyized Davao City really bad? Yes, if it means strapping a diversified community into a sanitized mold that limits the development of cultural identity and impedes the cultural awareness of the people. No, if it means portrayals of positivity through peaceful existence and unified front, however idealistic and imagined such notion might look.

However, it is safe to note that Disneyization has not completely infiltrated the public spaces of Davao City and the diverse cultures the city nurtures to the degree that the Disney brand has become synonymous to American consumerism. It is a possibility that Disneyization is not so much an issue of Disney influencing Davao City but of the people of Davao City consuming the creations produced by the artist or funded by any commissioning body through frequent visits to the parks, photo opportunities of and with the sculptures, and being non-responsive to the commodification this misrepresentation reflects on the different tribes' culture and identity. What one can glean in these various extrapolations is the suggestion that the public spaces in Davao City have become *Disneyized*, and the icons employed together with Kublai Millan himself have become a brand and are identifiable as Davao's symbolisms.

### **Attribution**

This Paper is part of the author's master degree thesis of the same title.

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