

# Dimensions of Antigypsyism in Europe

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ENAR Anti-Racism in Focus 3

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**CENTRAL  
COUNCIL** [ of German  
Sinti & Roma

# We are RomaPop. Globalised Pop Culture and the Romani Rights Struggle for Self-definition in the Age of Superheroes

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## Magneto Begins

I remember quite often that as a child being a nerd was not cool at all, in fact I do remember crystal-clear how *Spiderman*, *The Avengers* and the *Fantastic Four* were an unknown world for most children. I grew up in Spain in the 1990s, where heroes of the American kind were not yet popular, when Marvel Comics was suffering a bankruptcy, and when superheroes did not do very well in movies.

Despite the hostility towards the genre, I always had the ability to isolate myself and focus on what I liked. My family was very poor, but my mother made enormous efforts to buy comics for my seven-year-old self. American comics were not just unpopular in the Spain of the 1990s, they were uncanny to my *Gitano peers*. My cousins and friends knew nothing about comics, and I knew that X-Men and the rest of my beloved heroes were not even “a thing” back in the day for most of our people.

So I grew up knowing that whatever “sacred knowledge” I would find in comics, I would probably never be able to share it with my People, or the rest of the world for that matter.

Comics knowledge was my gift and my curse, it empowered me but it isolated me, it gave me a voice in my mind, but not a community to share what I heard, it felt like finding the most incredible treasure in the world and not being able to explain it to anybody. As the years went by I realised that it was not just comics that I could not share with my People, it was my whole universe.

But one day I accidentally stumbled across a comic, *X-Men Unlimited # 2* (1993). In that comic it was revealed that Magneto was a Romani survivor of the Holocaust. Magneto was a mutant

with the power to control metals and electromagnetic fields created in the 1960s, but it was revealed now that he was a Sinti who lost his family during World War II.

Magneto did not believe in coexistence between different peoples, he defined his people as mutants, the next step in human evolution, and he was convinced that soon enough mutants will be rounded up, experimented and exterminated, as it happened in World War II for the Nazi victims. Magneto was a fictional character, the main antagonist of the *X-Men* series, but he was a hero to me, and related to my inner being more than any other character in the world.

I read about Magneto for the first time when I was eight years old and it led me to mental emancipation, to the work of Malcolm X and Franz Fanon, to the world of non-formal education and self-organisation.

It was a new world, a world where we matter, where we can control our destiny, where we can have revenge and glory, where we can commit mistakes and have meaningful victories, a world where we are not just victims. I knew then that I would spend the rest of my life proving to myself and to the world, that we Roma exist for good and bad in popular culture, where we need to fight as hard as in any other field if we want to achieve equality, and more importantly freedom.

### **The Roma Archetypes and the Antiheroes – The Case of Dr Doom**

For centuries, Roma have been an essential part of European folklore and myths, most of the time in a very simplistic and racist way. The Roma archetype in legends has always oscillated between the villain and the hero. Throughout the history of literature one can find many examples of Roma people and the “Gypsy” stereotype, like Cervantes’ *La Gitanilla* or Victor Hugo’s Bohemians in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. From William Shakespeare to Stephen King, there are thousands of references, but the case of American comic books is certainly exceptional.

The birth of the antihero archetype in the comic book genre came about in the 1960s. Antiheroes have been an essential part of literature's heritage throughout time, but during the decade of the 1960s, in the so-called silver age of American comics, the emotional and psychological complexity of superheroes and villains became something much more real and contradictory than in typical myths or legends.

Soon enough Roma people started to appear in American comics not just as second-class characters but as full actors in the most important events.

A great example of this is Dr Doom. Victor Von Doom is one of the best known and most influential comic book characters of all times. He was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby and first appeared in *Fantastic Four # 5* (1962). When Dr Doom appeared he changed the concept of villain forever. For example, we can say that George Lucas, the creator of *Stars Wars*, based the infamous Darth Vader on the Dr Doom archetype. An emotionally tormented character carrying a heavy burden of pain, despising all humanity for his extraordinary talent, covering his face because of his horrible scars, Dr Doom became iconic. *The Fantastic Four Annual #21* (1964) is the first time that Dr Doom's Roma origins appear: Victor Von Doom was born in Latveria (an imaginary country between Hungary and Serbia). As a child, Victor suffered from racism and persecution, losing his parents because of persecution by local authorities.

Victor grew into a headstrong and brilliant man, using technology to create fantastic devices to keep the Baron's men at bay and protect the Roma. His feats drew the attention of the dean of Empire State University, who sent someone to the camp where he was living. The dean offered Victor the chance to study in the United States, and Victor chose to leave his homeland and his love, Valeria, behind. Once in America, he started to build a time machine and several amazing artefacts; one of them was a machine to talk with the dead. Unfortunately, the machine exploded, disfiguring Doom's face and causing his expulsion. Subsequently turning his back on the world, Doom went to Tibet where a hidden group of secret monks took care of him. At the end of this time he had created for himself an

armour and a mask: he became Dr Doom, swearing revenge on those who were responsible for his pain.

He returned to Latveria and succeeded in taking over his country. First, he recruited Roma people, starting with his own family and community. By the end of the conflict it was obvious even to the army of Latveria that nobody could fight against Dr Doom's intellect and strategy. He became absolute king, taking a special interest in the welfare of the Roma people, and establishing a sort of dictatorship where Roma were not persecuted, there was no disease, crime or poverty – and, of course, no antigypsyism.

### **Pop Culture, Challenge and Potential**

Talking about antigypsyism, as excited as I was to discover Magneto and Dr Doom's Roma background, I started to feel increasingly uneasy about the fact that most Roma characters in American comics adjusted to certain Roma stereotypes and were often the villains of the stories. We had a thief (Quicksilver), a witch (Scarlet Witch), a circus acrobat (Nightwing), a dictator (Dr Doom) and a Holocaust survivor, Magneto, whose Roma identity was denied and was often poorly treated. Just the tip of the iceberg. Those were stories with the potential to inspire but also harm the soul of Romani children in an irreparable way.

After screening *X-Men: first class* over 200 times and leading workshops and lectures on the topic all over Europe, there was a moment when I started to rethink the nature and the quality of the work needed for a significant change – how do we turn an inspirational but flawed narrative into power for our people? That is the key question for our generation of young Roma advocates.

During seven years working as an activist and educator, I used pop culture and art with great success among young Roma and non-Roma audiences. Hundreds felt inspired and many young Roma activists and artists took over the narratives of Romani heroes. Pop culture became the foundation of the Yag Bari Roma association in Spain, and also the foundation of two Spanish Roma youth networks, Kali Zor and Kali Yag. Dr Doom became popular in Germany too, where Kenan Emimi, a Roma activist, started to use the mutants as a

metaphor to denounce the evictions of Kosovan Roma refugees, and wrote a hit for a Roma hip-hop artist called Kastro. Once they even marched through Hamburg in a giant truck with Dr Doom and other Romani characters printed on the sides of the truck.

Superheroes became an inspiration for the Phiren Amenca Network, that helped me to create and design methodologies of non-formal education based on American comics. Bulgaria, Romania, Czechia, the United Kingdom, the United States etc. – from 2012 until today the Magneto tale travelled across the Roma movement. In France, it was the foundation of the Yag Bari boxing club, a youth club for Roma children at risk of eviction and violence, and in Germany again, it also inspired the creators and performers of “*Roma Armee*”, the most important piece of Roma theatre of our time. News arrived to me, of people that I have never meet, who started to share my childhood story as theirs! I felt it was an honour that this narrative had passed from my conscious self to the collective sub-conscience of the Roma movement in the 21st century.

## **RomaPop**

In 2014 I was living in Budapest preparing myself to organise the first Roma international exchange on pop culture and sci-fi. The small project ended up being a success in 2015, and around 60 youngsters from seven different countries gathered for ten days to discuss pop culture and its use for our own people and struggle. In that period, I started to think about RomaPop, a structure that could provide space for us in the world of pop culture.

RomaPop would be the Spaceship that would land us in the public sphere of pop culture advocacy. Questioning the way policies are developed, participating in the agenda setting, targeting political systems, proposing policy solutions and opening up space for public argumentation were some of the long-term aims we wanted to achieve that would benefit Roma people in a significant way.

## **RomaPop’s First Year**

I travelled to the United States and moved to New York for six months, and then I travelled to Philadelphia, Washington DC, Chicago, Atlanta, Gainesville, Miami, Austin, Minneapolis, St Paul,

Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and many other cities. I contacted hundreds of pop culture stakeholders, artist, producers, filmmakers, bloggers, editorialists, video game companies etc. I also networked with other minority groups dedicated to advocating for narratives in pop culture and arts. I collected 17,000 comics and pieces of Roma related art and pop culture, I created two non-profits, one in New York City and the other in Los Angeles, ended up in Forbes magazine as the first and only Roma in the history of the publication.

The project was a success, but did not raise the attention of mass media, with the exception of Forbes. I was successful as an individual, but I learned long ago that individual success is not always related to a community's access to power.

Then I attended the New York Comic Con, which gathers over 250,000 persons every year to celebrate and explore pop culture, a highly political event, where I realised the potential of such events for strategic confrontation. It was Zeljko Jovanovic who suggested gathering a team and travelling back to New York in 2016 to see how we could take advantage of the meeting.

### **New York Comic Con 2016**

In my first year in the United States I realised that a team entirely composed of Roma people would fail, as there is no empathy or any moral argument related to Roma in the public sphere in the United States. We needed non-Roma, but not white people; we needed minorities with representation in the US pop culture industry, if we were to be listened to in any way. Jewish and African American participation was crucial to get the attention of the audience and of companies.

The final team was composed of the following people: Patricia Caro, a Rromani feminist and extraordinary advocate for Rromani women rights, Bekah Ward, a journalist and psychologist, Dafina Savic, a North American based Roma activist, Benny Fischer, President of the European Union of Jewish students, Michael Simmons, a civil rights veteran, and finally my brother Antonio, who shares my knowledge of the world of pop culture narratives related to our people.

On our first night together we discussed what would be the best course of action. We had the experience of my last two years, and if we wanted to challenge the industry we needed to confront it.

The first panel we attended was a panel organised by Times Out, New York Times Magazine, and was about LGBTQI representation in *X-Men* comics and movies. Two of my favourite writers Chris Claremont and Peter David were there. Claremont made Magneto a survivor of the Holocaust and represented Roma in a positive light, and Peter David was *Incredible Hulk's* most famous writer and GLAAD awarded, and also the leader of an anti-Trump coalition of writers and comic book authors, a firm defender of Muslims, Hispanic and other minorities in the United States. So what could go wrong? Everything!

### **Hit and Run!**

After a panel about representation we seized the moment. I stood during question time and asked about Rromani representation. I expected my question would be easily dismissed, but instead of a comprehensive or elusive answer Peter David started an anti-Rromani rant, and affirmed that Roma “mutilate their children so they become better beggars”. After the attack I was removed from the room by security, while the moderator said “ok, we all have different opinions”. Among all those LGBTQI persons and people of colour, nobody questioned this statement. What a moment of clarity and understanding for me in my years in the Roma struggle... as my grandpa used to tell me, we are on our own.

After being accompanied outside, my team walked out. Two persons came after me and said they felt so sorry, and that what happened was so wrong. I was close to tears – all my life reading comics to face the reality that not only were we ignored, but we were fully hated by the industry.

In the midst of chaos, I organised our team. Michael and my brother went to talk to Daniel Kutchin, editor of Marvel's *X-Men*, who was also on the panel. Bekah talked to Claremont, Benny started to call all his contacts in New York and elsewhere, Dafina wrote a formal complaint to the meeting organiser, a company name ReedPop



which had a formal complaint system. We were negotiating to obtain a formal space in the event in 2017-2018.

I decided to talk to Peter David himself after the panel. He told me nervously: “I did not say anything wrong and I will not apologise”. He was shaking and so nervous that he fainted. I helped him, offered him a bottle of water and joined him in the artist alley, where he signed comics during the convention. He tried to convince me that Roma do in fact mutilate their children, despite the fact that I told him that I as a Roma have no disability caused by my family. The accusation was so bizarre that the artists around him started to laugh and apologised in the name of the comic book industry.

At one point he started to half-apologise, and I told him that we were preparing a video<sup>1</sup> of the intervention and incident and that he had the opportunity to help us to be heard by bringing us to the negotiation table with Axel Alonso and Tom Brevoort, big shots at Marvel. But he said he would never apologise, but that he would make Dr Strange 2099 a Roma character, as a kind of compensation.

It was tempting but I had no guarantee that I could trust him with no paper signed. What if I lost the power of the video now, when it was still relevant? I told him how much I loved his comics and how ridiculous it was that now I was face-to-face with one of my favourite childhood writers defending common sense.

## **NYCC 2016 Aftermath**

Coming back to check my team we were winning in all fronts. The video was online with thousands of views, Twitter was burning, journalists started to request interviews with me. After a few days, dozens of articles on the topic were published and a conversation started on Rromani representation in pop culture.

## **Last Words**

As a young Roma adult I saw how the first decade and a half of the 21st century brought us an increasing number of hate crimes against Roma communities and individuals, and a popular acceptance of

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1 The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4QuxCNe89g&t=1s>.

hate speech as a political weapon produced one of the most horrible decades of Antigypsyism since World War II. With the support of the general apathetic electorate, far-right parties have become a serious political force, in the case of Slovakia, the Czech Republic or Hungary, and the popular movements and civil initiatives against Roma have multiplied and increased their visibility.

Very often the only responses of the Roma civil society are Facebook chains, letters of complaint or petitions. None of these methods seriously challenge the mainstream population's attitudes and viewpoints, but why?

The answer I thought, maybe lies in the apparent lack of common bonds between the mainstream population and the Roma minority. At this point we need to acknowledge that we were totally powerless in the area of pop culture. Yes, we had a young generation of people very able to talk extensively about sci-fi movies, TV shows and video games, but we lacked a strategy to articulate our potential to produce, understand, control and promote pop culture in defence of our interests.

My experience and the experience of dozens of Roma advocates throughout Europe proves that Antigypsyism needs to be combated in the world of pop culture. Do folklore and mainstream beliefs shape political agendas? Or is the opposite true? This is a complex subject. What I have seen and experimented in my own flesh and bones, is that if we try to change what people write about us in comics, we change our reality in the process. This may be the magic truth that RomaPop can bring to us as a People.

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