



PRESS STATEMENT: Hate Speech Against Rromani People at New York Comic Con 2016

RomaPop calls on Marvel and ReedPOP to take concrete actions to condemn hate speech and ensure fair representation of Rromani People in Marvel editorial policies and future NYCC events.

New York City, 12 October 2016

On the evening of Thursday, October 6, Vicente Rodriguez – Rromani human rights activist and founder of RomaPop – stood in front of a New York Comic Con panel on LGBT representation in comic books. He asked about his people, about Rromani representation. In response, his cultural and ethnic identity was viciously attacked through the regurgitation of racist stereotypes by iconic Marvel writer Peter David.

[A video of the incident and RomaPop's initial response statement can be found on YouTube.](#)

These comments made by Peter David are unfortunately not isolated, but rather reflective of the ongoing widespread regurgitation of stereotypes about Rromani people across media, pop culture, literature and society at large. Such stereotypes have not only served to perpetuate racism, but they have also been repeatedly used to justify and fuel hate speech, violent persecution and discrimination of Rromanies today.

Prior to the Peter David scandal, RomaPop had assembled a call-to-action for Marvel Comics. In this document, we asked that Marvel include in its editorial policies a plan to help rebuild the image of Rromani in Marvel comic books. We asked that they finally guarantee the representation and direct consultation of our people to do so. We asked that they establish a conversation with Rromani activists, scholars and authors in order to ensure that this process is equitable and accurate, and that they listen to their growing audience of Rromani young people.

Peter David's words served unwittingly to confirm the urgency of these requests.

On the night of the Peter David incident, RomaPop and allies followed up with New York Comic Con organizers, ReedPOP. We filed an anti-harassment claim against the brutal treatment that Vicente, and Rromani people as a whole, received from David and his emerging allies – in conversations at the Comic Con itself, at his Artist's Alley station, and through online hate speech. We asked that ReedPOP take a public stance against Peter David's hate speech, that they properly enforce their [anti-harassment policy](#), and that they accept our request for a panel at next year's New York Comic Con to appropriately address the issue of Rromani representations in comic books.

RomaPop persistently followed up with ReedPOP representatives for the duration of the four-day Comic Con. One day after the event came to a close, we were notified privately that they do not condone Peter David's words, and that they will meet "when everyone is back in the office to discuss how they can further enforce their anti-harassment policy".

On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, RomaPop called for a reaction from Marvel, hoping that the race-conscious, careful, progressive organization would react. When asked about the incident, Marvel editors and writers refused to talk to RomaPop representatives. They failed to issue any official statement on this top news story about the writer of their current X-Factor and Spider-Man 2099.

RomaPop allies provided as much concrete evidence to Peter as possible to educate him on the falsehood of his unfounded and racist assumptions, both at Comic Con, and through our online presence. For three days, he doubled down on his claims, reasserting their veracity and citing his own eye-witness testimony and snapshots as his "evidence".



Amidst growing pressure from Comic Con attendees (fans) and RomaPop supporters, on the day marking the end of Comic Con, Peter David finally issued a statement referencing his apologetic stance towards any Rromani people he had offended in a post titled [“Final Thoughts on the Romani”](#).

In this post, Mr. David retracted some of his former claims by suggesting that “[about Rromani people], the more convinced I’ve become that what I saw was indeed examples, not of children crippled by parents, but children suffering from a genetic disorder.” However, he stayed in step with the pattern of assumptions based on his two-week stint in Romania: “Are the children in fact unabused? No, because I know what I saw with my own eyes regarding that dad and his son.” In this response, he retracted one racist generalization for another, now accusing Rromani parents of being drug addicts who force their children to beg and steal. RomaPop is horrified by the fact that Peter David has been writing Rromani characters for over 20 years holding such a set of prejudices.

Peter David’s “Final Thoughts” were not about the Rromani people, or about RomaPop, or even about retracting hate speech. The skillful writer wove an apology post on what some fans were undoubtedly more interested in: himself. He excused his behavior, claiming that he is “not a racist” but simply a man who “feels passionately about things”.

Though we are glad Mr. David acknowledged that his previous assumptions about Rromani people were inaccurate, he failed to part with his tendency to generalize. He did not recognize the content of his statements as racist, nor did he acknowledge that the core problem is not his own identity but the systemic impact of his hateful words.

We, RomaPop, are still calling for a response that reflects the severity of the underlying issues. We are still asking ReedPOP to commit to a public show of solidarity, a concrete plan to fix their anti-harassment mechanisms, and a panel at next year’s Comic Con that will address Rromani representation. We are still asking Marvel to respond publicly to the openly racist hate speech of one of their most prolific writers, and to address our initial set of demands which encourage them to alter policy to ensure sufficient education and guidelines on Rromani people, as well as formal consultation with Rromani representatives and creators.

With great power comes great responsibility.

Marvel, ReedPOP and Peter David all have a great responsibility to abide by their own principles and to respect diversity and inclusiveness for all – including Rromani people.

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RomaPop is an international alliance for Rromani rights, founded by Jewish, African American and Rromani advocates, scholars and artists working together for social justice in pop culture narratives. RomaPop aims to challenge colonialism within editorial policies against any minorities, and particularly against Rromani people. We believe that American pop culture has harmed the capacity of Rromani people to be part of their respective societies. We provide opportunities to authors, writers and editors to access an accurate portrayal of Rromani people, culture and history through different educational materials, events and seminars in the US and Europe.