Not Citizen-Soldiers but Vigilantes

Superheroines in *The Old Guard* (2020)

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1. Introduction: *The Old Guard* and (Female) Superheroes in Comic and Film

While most action movies and a majority of comic books focus on hypermasculine male characters, speaking to how tightly the ideal of the citizen-soldier and the ideal of the superhero/vigilante are intertwined with certain ideas about gender, the comic book series *The Old Guard*, as well as the 2020 *Netflix* adaptation of the first book, feature two, and later even three female leads.[1] And where most superhero/vigilante teams are made up of white people, and especially white men – *Marvel's Avengers* are one example – the lead characters in *The Old Guard* feature a white woman, an African American woman and an Asian woman. If such comics and movies focus on teams of soldiers or superheroes, like Marvel's *Avengers* or DC's *Justice League*, they usually feature only one token regular female member who is consistently positioned as a hyperfeminine foil for the men surrounding her, like *Marvel*'s Peggy Carter or Black Widow. As Jeffrey A. Brown notes, »[t]he inclusion of women on these teams of Hawksian Professionals in action narratives almost always reduces her to the role of sexual object. The women may have admirable skills in any area of professional expertise but as the lone female – the Smurfette among military experts – her primary use to the team is typically her sexual attractiveness« (Brown 2015: 59).

Sexual attractiveness, however, is not the »primary use« the female characters in the comic book series *The Old Guard* have for their team. At the time of writing the series consists of Greg Rucka's and Leandro Fernandez's *The Old Guard, Book One: Opening Fire* (2017), *The Old Guard, Book Two: Force Multiplied* (2020), and the anthology *The Old Guard: Tales Through Time* (2021), which features two chapters by Rucka and Fernandez and ten chapters by other teams of authors and artists. The art of

1 A second film, provisionally titled *The Old Guard 2*, was greenlit by Netflix in 2021 and started shooting in the summer of 2022, but as of writing there has been no release date yet.

the comics emphasizes Andy's and Nile's conventional attractiveness. Andy is depicted as a slim white woman with long hair and full lips who uses hook-ups to try to deal with her existential crisis. Nile is an equally slim Black woman with short, straightened hair. In the film version, neither character has to use »feminine wiles« or is in any other way depicted as hypersexualized. Indeed, Andy who, as the oldest of this group of quasi-immortal vigilantes, is the clear leader at the outset of the story (in both film and comic books) has short black hair in the film and references to her sex life have been entirely removed. This slightly more butch aesthetic seems to be supposed to signal and emphasize her role as a leader, continuing the superhero film genre's long association between masculinity and leadership. Still, Andy's slightly more female masculinity presents a departure from other female characters in superhero movies. As part of her leadership role, it is Andy who repeatedly makes tough decisions to protect the group, including »extracting« the newly resurrected Nile from a Marine base in Afghanistan while the others flee to a safe house after being exposed by a contact, the ex-CIA agent Copley. Nile, as a former Marine, also does not fit the stereotype of the sexualized female superhero and, in her turn, will later on be instrumental in rescuing Andy and the male members of the group. This dynamic shifts in the second book, while the anthology is more focused on exploring unknown parts of Andy's and the other characters' backstories.

The comic and film versions of *The Old Guard*, then, present female superhero characters who are not reduced to being the hyperfeminine sidekick to the all-male group around them. Andy's role as a leader of the group and Nile's role as rescuer of the other immortals later in the film present them as more effective and self-determined than female characters in most other current action movies and at least some current comics, aligning them more closely with the archetype of the independent male vigilante/superhero. Thus, *The Old Guard* is part of a wider turn towards vigilante (super-)heroes who are presented as more effective than official militaries that has become a recurring theme during the past few decades of the so-called »War on Terror« and is connected to conceptualizations of the »warrior« more than the citizen-soldier. And while the vigilante hero is by no means a female-only figure, I argue that *The Old Guard*'s representation and positioning of Andy (and to a lesser extent Nile) allows us to investigate larger questions about how contemporary popular culture conceptualizes women with guns (and other kinds of weapons).In this essay, I plan to interrogate how constructions of gender interact with and compound representations of women as vigilantes rather than citizen-soldiers in US American post-9/11 popular culture. Here, I will place a special focus on the character of Andy/Andromache and how the comic books' and the film's representations of her past – and especially her connection to ancient the Amazons of Antiquity's Scythia and to the Greek epic of the Odyssee – interact with their representations of a vigilante femininity. In a second step I will argue that the fact that gun-toting heroines are so often located outside of the controls of the nation-state or international organi-

zations cannot be read as a straightforward feminist interrogation of these states or organizations and their military institutions. Instead, the comics and the film participate in Eurocentric narratives of »Western« progress without meaningfully using their diverse characters and their pasts to interrogate these narratives.

2. Citizen-Soldiers and (Female) Vigilantes in the Post-9/11 World

In many ways, Andy and Nile form the central dichotomy of *The Old Guard* in both the comics and the film. Andy, or Andromache of Scythia, who is the homodiegetic narrator, is several thousand years old and has seemingly been a fighter and, more importantly, a vigilante for most of this time, fighting with her group of changing companions »for what [they] think is right« (*The Old Guard* 00:44:18–00:44:35). She is also a white woman.[2] Nile Freeman, on the other hand, is a Black US Marine who gets killed and resurrected for the first time while on deployment in Afghanistan. While neither the comics nor the film give precise dates, the technology – for example smartphones (00:03:32) – depicted in both, the reference to Afghanistan, and especially Nile's work in a unit that seems to be modeled on the US Marine Corps' Female Engagement Units – units of female Marines that would talk with local women and children – situate the storyline in the late-2000s or 2010s, and thus within the context of the so-called Global War on Terror. Thus, she is not only much younger than Andy, she also starts the film as a present-day citizen-soldier, one following a lengthy family tradition of serving in the US elite fighter group of the Marine Corps. And, if her last name is any indication, with connections all the way back to the American Civil War. Lisa D. Cook et al cautiously suggest in a working paper that the name »Freeman« could be part of a set of names that »reflect political or social intentions« and that it »could certainly reflect political ideals and the emancipation of former bondsmen (one's child was born free) (Cook 2013: 16). Crucially, Andy and her team fought on the side of the Union during the Civil War as viewers are informed by a lingering shot on an old photograph in the film (00:15:42–00:16:05). Thus, while Nile's last name connects her to a pivotal moment in US history that Andy's group has influenced, her first name highlights her connection to Africa. These telling names also highlight the interracial alliances within the group: Andy and Nile serves as one example, while Joe and Nicky are the most prominent second one.[3]

2 The comics, more than the film, have the potential for troubling and questioning the category of race, especially given Andy's apparent ease to fit in with very different groups and societies (see also fig. 1). The question of whether they are doing so, however, lies outside the scope of this essay.

3 The group's, or at least one member's participation in the US Civil War is further expanded on in the short comic »Love Letters« in the Anthology *The Old Guard. Tales Through Time*. As this story focuses almost exclusively on Nicky, however, it is outside the scope of this essay.

Thus, as the film begins, Nile is presented as a female citizen-soldier. The citizen-soldier ideal, which originates in the theories of statecraft of enlightenment philosophers Niccolo Machiavelli and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is linked to the founding of the US and to the War of Independence. For most of US-American history, it has been, and remains, a decidedly masculine ideal. R. Claire Snyder explains the gendered conception of the citizen-soldier in the following way:

> engagement in the martial practices of the civic militia simultaneously creates citizens with civic virtue, soldiers who display manly *virtu*, and men who acquire their *armed masculinity* in opposition to a denigrated femininity. Consequently, Machiavelli's Citizen-Soldier ideal fuses together soldiering, masculinity and citizenship. (Snyder 1999: 25; orig. emphases)

The citizen-soldier, then, is an archetype for men's relationship to the state and one that stands in clear opposition to the male superhero or vigilante, who »claims surpassing concern for the health of the community, but he never practices citizenship« (Lawrence/Jewett 2002: 48). With this differentiation in mind, it also becomes clear that all the members of the Old Guard could be read as former citizen-soldiers who have turned into vigilantes. (Though this reading is somewhat anachronistic for Andy, Nicky, and Joe, whose first lives and original military service – in the broadest sense – took place before the development of republics and nations states.)

The feminine equivalent of the US-American citizen-soldier is traditionally the figure of the Republican Mother, which also originates in the War of Independence but becomes even more defined during the 19th century. As Linda Kerber notes, women at the time of the Revolutionary War created »an ideology of citizenship that merged the domestic domain of the preindustrial woman with the new public ideology of individual responsibility and civic virtue« (Kerber 1980: 269). Nile, like many female Marines and other female servicemembers deployed during the so-called »War on Terror«, clearly falls into the category of the citizen-soldier, even as she retains some last vestiges of the Republican Mother. Viewers meet her and the rest of her Female Engagement Unit out on patrol, assisting in the search for a suspected terrorist by talking to a group of Afghan women. Thus, while she carries a weapon and even shoots her unit's target, she and the other female Marines also act as mediators between the domestic space of the Afghan women and the public space of the street, occupied by US-American Marines.

After Nile is killed by the insurgent and resurrected through her body's spontaneously developing healing powers, however, Nile's role as a Marine and thus as a citizen-soldier is immediately undermined in both the first comic book and the film. Before readers or viewers even get to see the resurrected Nile, they are witnesses to a conversation between two other female Marines, with one of them clearly doubting the fact that Nile could have survived her neck wound (*The Old*

Guard 00:25:13–00:26:49). The film lingers on these suspicions, showing scenes in which stares and whispers follow Nile through Camp after she is discharged by the doctors. When she returns to the tent she shares with the other female Marines, the other women's conversation immediately falls quiet. What is more, the other Marines clearly know that she has been ordered to relocate to Landstuhl, Germany for more testing and have packed her bags. No words of parting are spoken (00:29:11–00:30:36). Instead, they quietly stare as Nile collects her things and leaves. Here, the film, more so than the comic, highlights that Nile is no longer »one of the team« for the other Marines and foreshadows Andy later telling Nile that she is »not a Marine anymore« (00:42:59–00:43:04). Unlike Nile, whose citizen-soldier body belongs to the military and is deployed and ordered to a hospital, despite her miraculous recovery and desire to remain on active duty, Andy and her group are much more self-determined and mobile. Nile having to follow orders she does not like contrasts sharply with Andy's one-woman trip to »extract« Nile, which is a mission she decides to undertake on her own while sending her team on ahead to a safe house.

This mobility and the lack of oversight allows both the comics and the movie to strongly imply that the vigilantes are more effective in changing history and making the world »better« than governments and their non-military and military forces. While Andy is deeply disillusioned at the beginning of the comics and of the film, stating »We've done nothing. The world isn't getting any better, it's getting worse« (00:16:31–00:16:43) in the latter, it turns out by the end of the film that her and her team's actions have had positive ripple-effects across history. Copley, the former CIA agent who has discovered the group's secret, points out that whenever Andy saves someone, »two, three generations down the line, we reap the benefits« (01:29:22–01:29:33) because the descendants of those saved go on to do great things like inventing new medical procedures or otherwise becoming pioneers in their fields. Later, the film reinforces this assessment again in a scene involving the group minus Booker after Andy, Nicky and Joe have been freed from the villain's research facility and Booker has been sent into a 100-year exile. The scene cuts between close-ups on Copley's evidence – photos and newspaper clippings of different conflicts or desasters across the decades, photocopies of ID cards for the different members of the group, articles about people achieving great things and post-it notes on when and by whom in the group they were saved – and close-ups on Nicky, Joe, and Andy's faces. Meanwhile, Copley explains »This is only what I found going back the last 150 years or so. When you think about how old you are, the good you've done for humanity becomes exponential«. Nile drives the point home further by saying »Maybe this is the why, Andy« (01:51:02–01:52:52), referring back to their earlier conversations about the group's immortality and Nile's struggles to accept her new state (00:53:00–00:53:11). The soundtrack drives this point home even more. The song used in this scene is Active Child's »Cruel World« (2017) and the following

lyrics coincide with the scene: »Count your blessings, you won't need them when you're gone/It's a cruel world/You can't see it, you can't see it, even though/it's a cruel world…«. The song's »cruel world« is clearly on display on Copley's wall of evidence. And the repeated words »You can't see it« hark back to Nile's earlier reaction to Copley's evidence, when she realizes that Andy cannot see the good she and her group have been doing because »she's in it« (01:29:33–01:29:39), i.e. she is too close to these historical events to see the impact she is having. Here, then, the film uses several techniques to imply that the groups actions and the saving of seemingly random individuals has been influential in »making the world a better place« even if it does not seem so to the group and Andy specifically.

In the comics, this revelation about the group's impact on the world comes much later in the storyline, in the second book *Force Multiplied*, when Noriko/Quynh, a former member of the group who had been lost at sea returns and kidnaps Booker. In the book, Copley shares his information with Nicky and Joe who have caught him spying on Andy while she is talking to Noriko/Quynh (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 96–106). Rather than portraying one conversation followed by the other, the narrative switches back and forth between them, using the revelation of the group's positive impact on the world to emphasize the difference between them and Noriko/Quynh. This emphasis is not only created by contrasting these two conversations but also by Copley insisting that »[Noriko] is not like you guys. You *help* people. She *hurts* them. Drugs, weapons, trafficking, ties to criminal organizations around the globe…« (ibid.: 106). Noriko/Quynh is thus a clear foil for Andy and her group, an immortal who has a negative impact on the world. The fact that she is an Asian woman adds a racially charged dimension to the story that I will explore in more detail below. It remains to be seen how the second film will pick up on this storyline, but it is clear that in both the first film and the comics the group's impact on the world has led to positive gains for humanity.

The same does apparently not apply to governments and their various agencies, who we only encounter in the context of death – both the Afghan insurgent's and Nile's before she is resurrected. Ultimately, the film and the comics justify Andy's and the group's vigilantism by highlighting the positive impact their actions have on the world. In the film, Andy's hiring of Copley so he can find the right jobs for them represents a recommitment to the group and its lifestyle on Andy's terms. The world apparently depends on this group of quasi-immortals operating outside of any kind of formal power structure for continued progress. What neither the comics nor the film have addressed so far, however, is the impact all the killing the group does has on world history. Including this dimension would complicate the narrative's black and white dichotomy as it would force a different kind of reckoning with violence and its effects. Essentially, the mercenaries and private security hired by the group's antagonists – most obviously Merrick in the film and the first comic book – are portrayed as bad by association and therefore, the film implies, as deserving what is

coming to them. This is maybe most obvious when a group of Merrick's mercenaries homophobically mock the captured Nicky and Joe and are subsequently killed (00:58:57–01:00:21). This framing »work[s] to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot« (Butler 2010: 3).

Staying outside of governmental organizations or supervision is shown as a way for Nile and Andy, as well as the queer couple Nicky and Joe to affect historic change. This could be read either as a deliberate criticism of governmental power and overreach or as a entrenchment of post-9/11 developments in popular culture. As Erik Mortensen has pointed out when analyzing vigilante movies,

> [i]n the past decade there has been a proliferation of vigilante texts and images in the culture in the form of books, graphic novels, films, and television shows. 9/11 not only helped to create both a new climate of fear and a new found [sic] desire for defense at a national level, but it also eventually eroded trust in both big government and one's neighbors and fellow citizens. The War on Terror, in other words, raised the possibility that the enemy could be anyone. As a result, the mythic individuality of America is being both called upon and resisted in the form of more government regulation and control for security purposes. (Mortensen 2015: 157)

The Old Guard and its insistence that unilateral decision-making by vigilante actors is more effective and, most importantly, more likely to improve the world than nation-states and their governments in the post-9/11 world needs to be seen in the context of this development.

3. (Female) Vigilantes as Perpetual Outsiders and Unilateral Actors in »Western« History

While academic analyses of comics and the first film have been sparse so far, *The Old Guard* was hailed as a feminist film by pop culture journalists after its release.[4] I would agree that the way it positions especially its female characters challenges the usual gender dynamics of the action hero genre. Andy and Nile's depiction in the movies, especially the more butch looks chosen for both deviates from the hyperfeminine and in some ways hypersexualized depiction in the comics. I would also, at least in part agree with Novak and Wieser-Cox's assertion (2022: 76) that the film

4 Anne Cohen's review titled »*The Old Guard* Director Gina Prince-Bythewood Wants To Show Women They're Warriors« (2020) is one example as is Murtada Elfadl's review titled »The Old Guard« (2020). A year after the films initial release, Aviva Dove-Viebahn published another review titled »The Old Guard: Revisiting an Exceptional Feminist Action Film on its One-Year Anniversary« (2021).

queers the genre and how it represents violence and extend this to the comics as well. At the same time, I would not go so far as to say that the comics or the film present a meaningful feminist interrogation of central tropes and narratives of the action movie or the comics genres, especially where narratives around power and power structures – governmental or otherwise are concerned because the film sticks too closely to the dominant depictions of vigilantism of the post-9/11 era, without interrogating the need for this vigilantism or, indeed, its supposedly positive effects.

As DiPaolo has pointed out, superhero stories can be sorted into three broad categories: »establishment, anti-establishment, and colonial« (DiPaolo 2011: 12). I would suggest that *The Old Guard* falls into DiPaolo's definition of the anti-establishment superhero narrative: »In the second category, the anti-establishment narrative, the superhero stands in opposition to an evil governmental, corporate, or aristocratic villain (which is sometimes propped up by a misguided establishment hero)« (ibid.: 12). In the first comic and the first movie, the pharmaceutical executive Steven Merrick (Harry Melling) is clearly the »corporate villain« who is trying to exploit the team's quasi-immortality for his own gain. The film also positions the military – and by extension the US government – as a possible antagonist to Nile's self-determination and well-being. In addition, the second comic shows the group being tracked by an FBI agent and other law enforcement agencies, another way in which the US government is positioned as an adversary.

The film's ending, which sees Andy and her team deciding to continue their mercenary work, but now supported by Copley who is supposed to find missions for them that will have a positive impact on the world, could be seen as critical of both governmental and corporate power structures. The same could be said for the larger story told in the comics. Indeed, as I have pointed out above, the film version of *The Old Guard* has garnered much praise as a »feminist action film« (Dove-Viebahn 2021: n. pag.) that is troubling its genre. And while the films and the comics focus on two female leads – and potentially three, if we count Noriko/Quynh – I would argue that that alone does not a feminist movie make. Similarly, the inclusion of Nicky and Joe and Andy and Noriko/Quynh's past relationship, while adding representations of queerness to the genre, could also be seen as a form of what Horacio N. Roque Ramírez has called »rainbow capitalism« (Roque Ramírez 2011: 192). Or, put differently, while the books and the film add a focus on female and queer characters, they do so while perpetuating post-9/11 narratives about omnipresent threats and the necessity and positive effects of unilateral decision-making that viewers are familiar with from other action movies. It is just that women and queer people now get to participate.

Despite all the ways *The Old Guard*, especially in the film version, goes against some trends in its genres, the comics and the film are also very Eurocentric. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have pointed out in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994),

> Eurocentric thinking attributes to the ›West‹ an almost providential sense of historical destiny. Eurocentrism, like Renaissance perspectives in painting, envisions the world from a single privileged point. It maps the world in a cartography that centralizes and augments Europe while literally ›belittling‹ Africa. (Shohat/Stam 1994: 2)

The *Old Guard* comics *and* the film are rooted in this kind of thinking, especially when it comes to the characters' backstories, which are hinted at in the movie and expanded on more in the comics books. The entire team has ties to so-called »Western« history, Andy is an ancient Scythian, Joe and Nicky met during the Crusades, Booker used to fight for Napoleon Bonaparte, and Nile is a (former) US Marine.

It is notable that Noriko/Quynh, who is introduced as an antagonist, is from Asia, though neither the comics nor the film make clear from where on the continent exactly. Joe and Noriko/Quynh *could* complicate the Eurocentrism underpinning these different texts, but so far, their characters fail to do so. Joe, or Yussuf, is a former Saracen warrior defending Jerusalem against the Christian crusaders. After becoming immortal and falling in love with Nicky (or Nicolo), a former Christian knight, the pair eventually meets Andromache and joins her group. Thus, Joe, rather than offering a counter-perspective to Eurocentric thinking, is subsumed into the teleological narrative of »the immortals« and their positive impact on (Western) civilization.

As Andy is the oldest immortal in the group and thus has had the longest impact on history, I will mostly focus on how she and her connections to so-called »Western civilization« are portrayed. Both the first comic and the first movie place Andy's origins in ancient Scythia, connecting her to historic nomadic people and to ancient myths about Amazons – nomadic tribes of female fighters that are featured in Greek myths. Her name means »fighter of men«. This is of course a telling name because fighting others, and mostly men, is central to Andy's identity. The thousands of years of fighting she has seen are also part of the identity crisis she suffers from in the first two books and in the movie. At the same time, this name connects her to both the Trojan War and to the Hercules myths. The most famous Andromache in Greek mythology is of course Hector's wife, who has long been a symbol for wifely duty, purity, and mourning in Western culture. However, there are also ancient myths that mention an Amazon fighter called Andromache who in some versions of the tales fights Hercules, replacing the more famous Hyppolita (Mayor 2014: 255). In addition, there are versions of the story of the Trojan War in which a band of Amazons joins the war on the side of Troy, as Adrienne Mayor points out: »One of the lost Trojan War epics, the *Aethiopis* (attributed to Arctinos of Miletos, $8^{th}/7^{th}$ century BC), was a sequel to the Iliad, taking up the action where Homer left off. The *Aethiopis* described the arrival of Queen Penthesilea and her band of Amazon mercenaries who came to help the Trojans fight the Greeks«. The comics never specify whether Andy

is one – or maybe all of these – mythic heroines, but they certainly play with these allusions and their implications, as well as with the renewed pop culture interest in women warriors in cinematic production and merchandise, such as the *Wonder Woman* films, the *Woman King*, or the elite woman guard in the *Black Panther* series.

Fig. 1: Opening page of The Old Guard: Opening Fire, 1

The Old Guard's first book introduces Andromache by juxtaposing three panels of her making love to different men with scenes that show her mid-battle, most prominently in the second panel of the book's first page, in which she is towering over soldiers in ancient Greek helmets (fig. 1). The way her body is posed in this panel

is almost orgasmic and together with the panels on the following two pages, which juxtapose further violent fight scenes with Andy lying on her back in post-coital exhaustion entrench sex and fighting as the two ways in which Andy is »killing time« (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 4), as her narration in the text boxes puts it.

In the film, this juxtaposition of sex and violence has been removed and the fact that Andy's life reaches back to antiquity is revealed later, when Andy introduces herself to Nile as »Andromache the Scythian« while extracting her from the military camp she is stationed in (00:30:20–00:31:26). Instead of juxtaposing sex and violence, the film focuses more on Andy using alcohol to self-medicate, which is a trope usually connected to male vigilantes, and on the connection between Andy as the oldest of the immortals and Nile as the youngest. This foregrounds their interracial alliance and the reciprocal roles of rescuer and rescuee they inhabit over the course of the film.

The second comic book, meanwhile, focuses more on Andy's feeling of loneliness which seems to haunt her through the different ages. On a page containing five panels in total (fig. 2), she is shown riding into battle leading different groups of ancient warriors, one of them once again in ancient Greek helmets, while Andy is wearing an ancient Greek hairstyle and dress. In addition to the changing groups of warriors and styles of dress around her, the panels also highlight the passage of time and Andy's growing loneliness and disillusionment through her left-to-right movement. While she is at the very left in the first panel and seems eager for battle, she is on the very right of the panel in the fourth, and while she is still on horseback, her posture is one of weariness. The last panel on this page features the appearance of Noriko/Quynh, who emerges out of darkness while Andy tells us in the accompanying text that she had been seeing Noriko/Quynh in her dreams for thousands of years. This highlights Noriko's age and her connection to Andy, both pivotal in the second comic and connected to the themes of loss and mourning that define Andy's character.

These themes, which are deeply connected to Andromache of Troy, play a central role in Andy's story throughout the comics and the film. Whether it is the loss of Noriko/Quynh, whose return causes another identity crisis for Andy in the second comic book, or the accumulating losses of several thousands of years of warfare, mourning defines her character almost as much as violence and a desire for revenge as, for example, in the chapter »How to Make a Ghost Town«, in which Andy annihilates the inhabitants of a village who murdered her former partner, Achilles, after she had left to evade questions about herself (»How to Make a Ghost Town«, Rucka et al. 2021: 88–101).[5] That this relationship with a mortal human, as well as Andy's

5 That her partner, who escaped slavery, is named Achilles is both a nod to the practice of US-American slaveowners of using names of Greek heroes for the people they enslaved and, I would argue, another way in which the comics play on Andy's connections to Greek antiquity

relationship with fellow immortal Noriko/Quynh ends in grief emphasizes Andy's role as a woman apart, who is unable to settle down due to the world's rejection, but who also cannot keep all the members of her group of immortals safe.

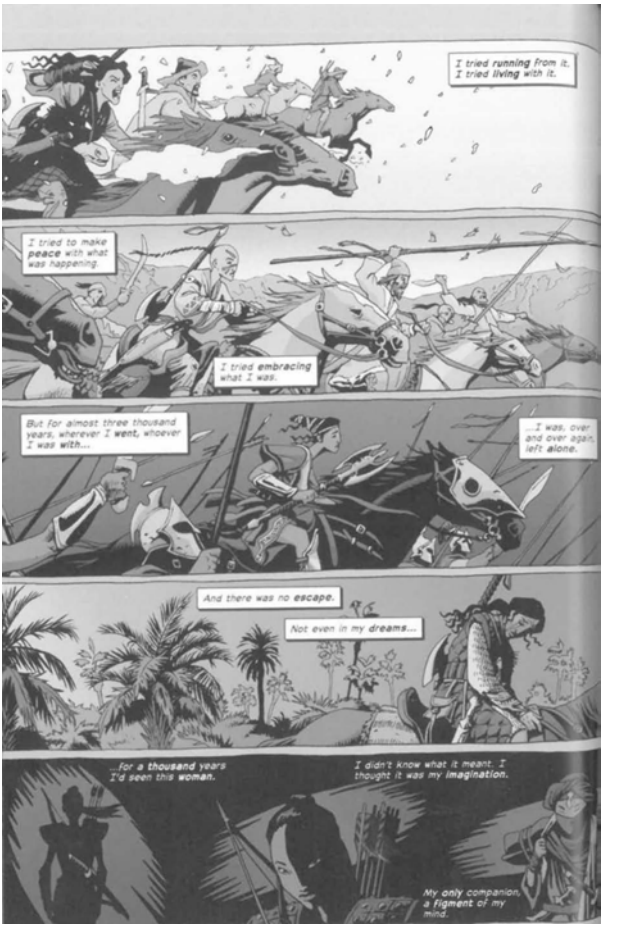

Fig. 2: Page from The Old Guard: Force Multiplied, 90

and myth. If she is indeed one or all of the Andromaches of the myths, there is an irony in her spending a lifetime with a man named after the hero who killed Hector, in this scenario one of her former husbands.

The themes of loss and mourning are complicated by narrative descriptions of memory – or the lack thereof. While the film and the first book highlight that Andy can't really remember her family, in the second book she describes being killed by a tribal leader who may have been her (chosen) mother in the text box narration that functions like a voiceover:

> If she wasn't my mother by birth, she was my mother in every other way. I couldn't have been *more* loyal to her if I'd tried. But by then she'd grown *afraid* of me. That's the truth of it. I was young and strong and smart, and that threatened her. Me coming up from *behind*, and *time* in front of her, waiting to collect its *due*… it made her *paranoid*, it made her *irrational*. That's why she murdered me… even if it wasn't her hand on the *spear* that did the job. Speaking as someone who has been *hurt* in almost *every way* imaginable… there's *no pain* quite like a broken heart. (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 85; orig. emphases)

This description is part of a longer reflection on being immortal, loneliness, biological kinship narratives and the (failure of) its alternatives, as well as the purpose Andy and the rest of her group serve. Andy highlights her difference from the others and her growing disillusionment. It also leads up to the depiction of Andy's and Noriko/Quynh's first meeting, thus emphasizing that Noriko/Quynh was the first person that made Andy feel not alone and setting up Andy's split from the group and joining up with Noriko/Quynh at the end of the book.

The short comic »My Mother's Axe« in *Tales Through Time* (Rucka et al. 2021: 4–17) on the other hand presents a spin on the »Ship of Theseus Puzzle«, a thought experiment first raised by Plutarch which asks if an object remains the same even after all its original parts have been switched out (Wasserman 2021: n.pag), centering on Andy's axe and, especially, on the fact that she inherited this axe from her (chosen) mother and the value the axe has for her because of that. Given the ending of the second book, it seems clear that the short comic takes place earlier than the narration I have quoted above, so it further highlights the discrepancies between what Andy tells the other members of their group about her life as immortal and what she actually remembers. At the same time, her insistence that the axe is still the same one she inherited from her mother highlights her deep concern with remembering and even mourning the past, even if she cannot recall all the details of that past. Here, the interracial alliance between Andy and Nile and an instance of matrilinear filiation is highlighted, one in which the axe plays a central role. And while we see Andy use both guns and the axe very proficiently throughout the comics and the film, the axe is highlighted as a special weapon several times. It features prominently in all the covers of the collected comics and is also the weapon Merrick takes as a trophy in the film and that Andy uses to injure him before Nile throws him (and herself) out of a high-level window to kill him (01:41:40–01:46:26). It is clear that Andy has a

special attachment to the axe, precisely because it was given to her by her (chosen) mother, even if that relationship ended in betrayal.

Through all these stories the comics, more obviously than the film, interrogate both biological kinship narratives and their alternative: the matrilineal filiation represented by Andy's axe and the story about her mother. The comics here seem to indicate that being immortal makes parent-child relationships – like the one between Andy and her mother or the one between Booker and his children (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 148) – as well romantic relationships – like the one between Andy and Achilles – impossible or at the very least fated to end in heartbreak. For the latter category, Nicky and Joe seem to be the only exceptions and this is because they are both immortal. »They got lucky in more ways than one« (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 48), Andy comments in the first comic when explaining who the other members of the group are to Nile. Nicky and Joe clearly act as a foil for Andy and Noriko/Quynh, whose relationship was interrupted when Noriko/Quynh was lost at sea and which turns decidedly negative after her return.

This breakdown of different kinship narratives, Andy's resulting loneliness and depression and especially her despair over what she sees as the world's negative development contrasts sharply with the narrative's insistence – in both media – that the immortals improve the world because the people they rescue have children or grandchildren that go on to make important discoveries or be influential in some other way (*The Old Guard* 01:29:22–01:29:33; *Force Multiplied*, 102–105). I would argue that her disillusionment and pessimism further highlight not only Nile's idealism, once again positioning the two of them as foils for each other, but it also highlights the good the immortals have been doing and the ways in which they have influenced (Western) history, further adding to the film's and the comics' Eurocentric bent.

The implication that the group's actions, unbeknownst to them, have for hundreds or thousands of years, made the world better by making it possible for specific people to be born, and the fact that they decide to more actively influence this dynamic by the end of the first film and the second comic book respectively feeds off of longstanding imperialist narratives positioning the West as arbiter of progress. This is especially the case because the historical events expressly depicted as being influenced positively by the group of immortals are almost all events commonly considered important turning points in »Western« history: the American Civil War (*The Old Guard*; *Tales Through Time*, 102–114), World War I (Rucka et al. 2021: 60–73), or World War II (ibid.: 18–31). This is, in part, due to what can be depicted as »historical« record in the comic books or via movie props – reproductions of photographs, for example – but it also circumscribes the group's sphere of influence and connects them tightly with dominant, Eurocentric ideas of history and progress. Thus, while depictions of Andy's past are rarely connected to specific events – tellingly, the only detail visible on the material on Copley's pinboard labeled »Andy« in the second book is a photo connected to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (Rucka/Fernández 2020:

104) – by repeatedly connecting her to ancient Greece and, less frequenly, to pivotal moments of Western history, the comic books and the film still participate in a teleological and ultimately Eurocentric narrative.

Noriko/Quynh is very clearly positioned as an antagonist to Andy's group. Her goal is not to improve the world, as she makes clear when her and Andy talk in *Force Multiplied*: »I figured it out, Andromache…dying over and over again I achieved clarity. I understood why. I was being punished…« (Rucka/Fernández 2020: 100–101). She further insists that this punishment is due to the immortals' hubris and that they are »[n]ot made to help them but to hurt them…our purpose is to make them suffer« (ibid.: 101). Thus, Noriko/Quyn is, at least in the comics, diametrically opposed to Andy's group. Making an Asian woman the antagonist of a group so clearly rooted in Western history and dedicated to improving the world is another expression of Eurocentrism, one that relies on tropes that portray the »Far East« and its peoples as a threat to the supposedly more progressive West.

This depiction of the group's influence on history also moves the film (and the books) away from a truly intersectional and feminist critique of governmental power and power structures. Instead, it relies on a staple of the vigilante/superhero narrative: that the rugged individual (or a team of rugged individuals) knows better than governments or international agencies and that they therefore get to unilaterally influence the fate of the world. In addition, neither the film nor the comic books have so far included any confrontation with the reality that their chosen path means that they have to actively choose who to save in the future. Nor, as I already indicated above, have the comic books or the film grappled with the negative effects of the killings and violence the group routinely enacts, effectively rendering their antagonists ungrievable. Instead, the published books seem to foreshadow a confrontation between Nile, Booker, Joe, and Nicky on one side and Noriko/Quynh and the freshly disillusioned Andy on the other hand, once again positioning the former group, rather than governments or intergovernmental agencies as best positioned to stop Noriko/Quynh and the crime syndicate she is leading.

4. Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether the next film or future comic books will go further into any of the questions raised in this essay and present more thorough commentary or even criticism of the superhero/vigilante trope and whether they will turn away from presenting female superheroes and vigilantes as most effective when they are operating outside of governmental structures. While they do have this in common with some male superheroes, it seems to be a more insistent trope for female characters, one that, I would argue, is rooted in gendered conceptions of citizenship and heroism. It further remains to be seen whether future entries into this narrative universe

will complicate its Eurocentric depiction of history. The last chapter in the anthology *Tales Through Time*, titled »The Bear« introduces a new character who seems to have a connection to the Middle East, going by some of the decorations depicted in his home (Rucka et al. 2021: 156–169), pointing towards the possibility of explorations of additional stories and complications of the ways in which history has been represented almost exclusively from a Eurocentric perspective in the comics and film so far.

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