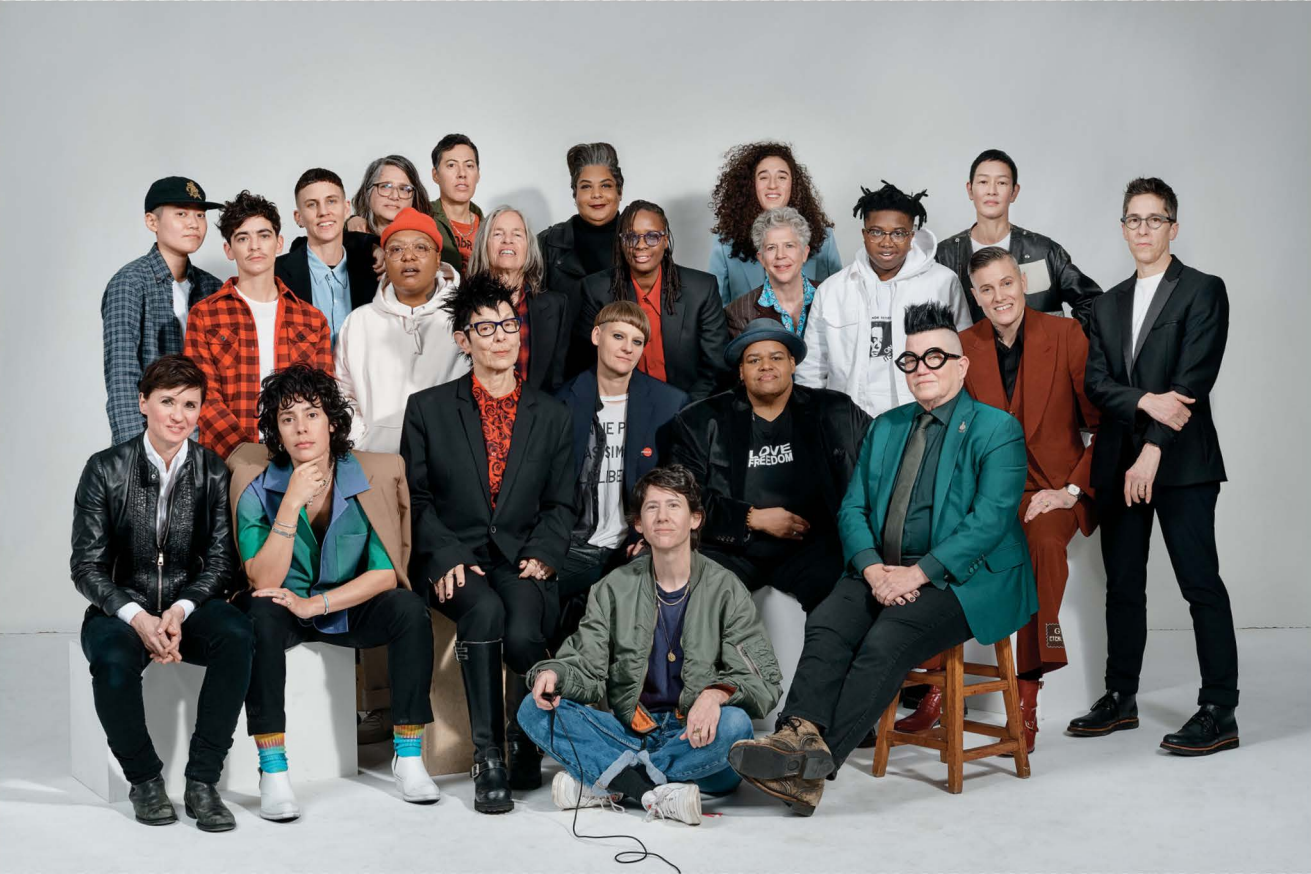
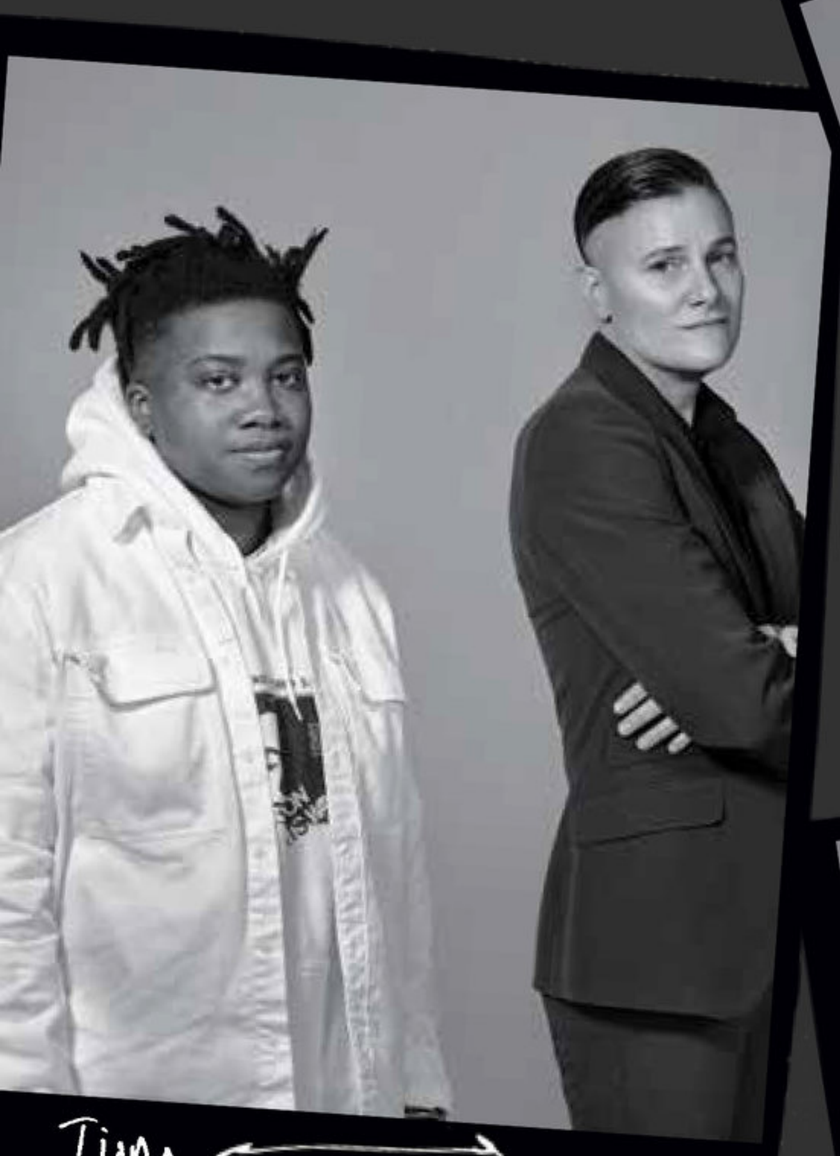

LOVE
FREEDOM

WE ARE FAMILY

Cover 1 of 4
BUTCHES AND STUDS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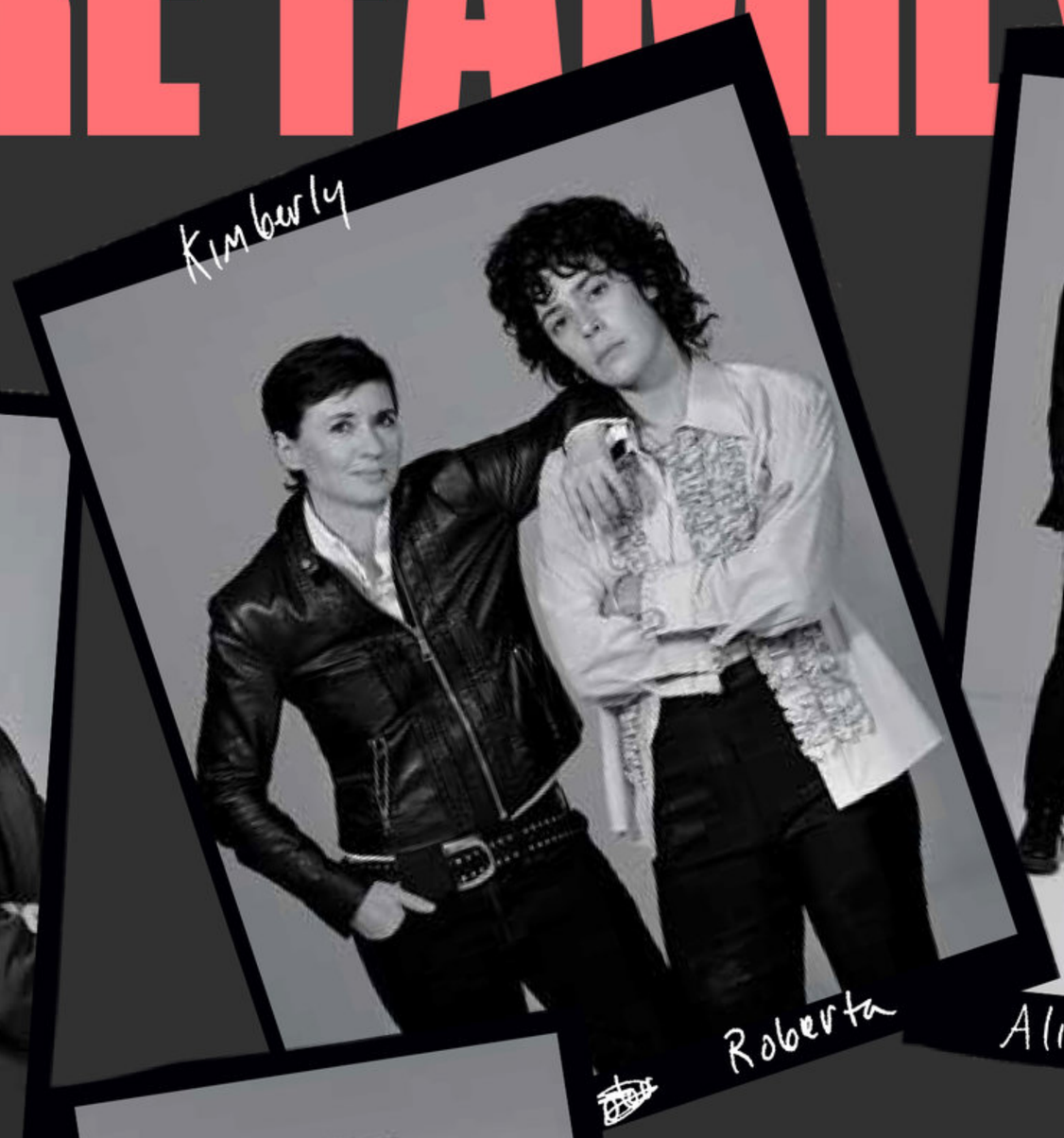
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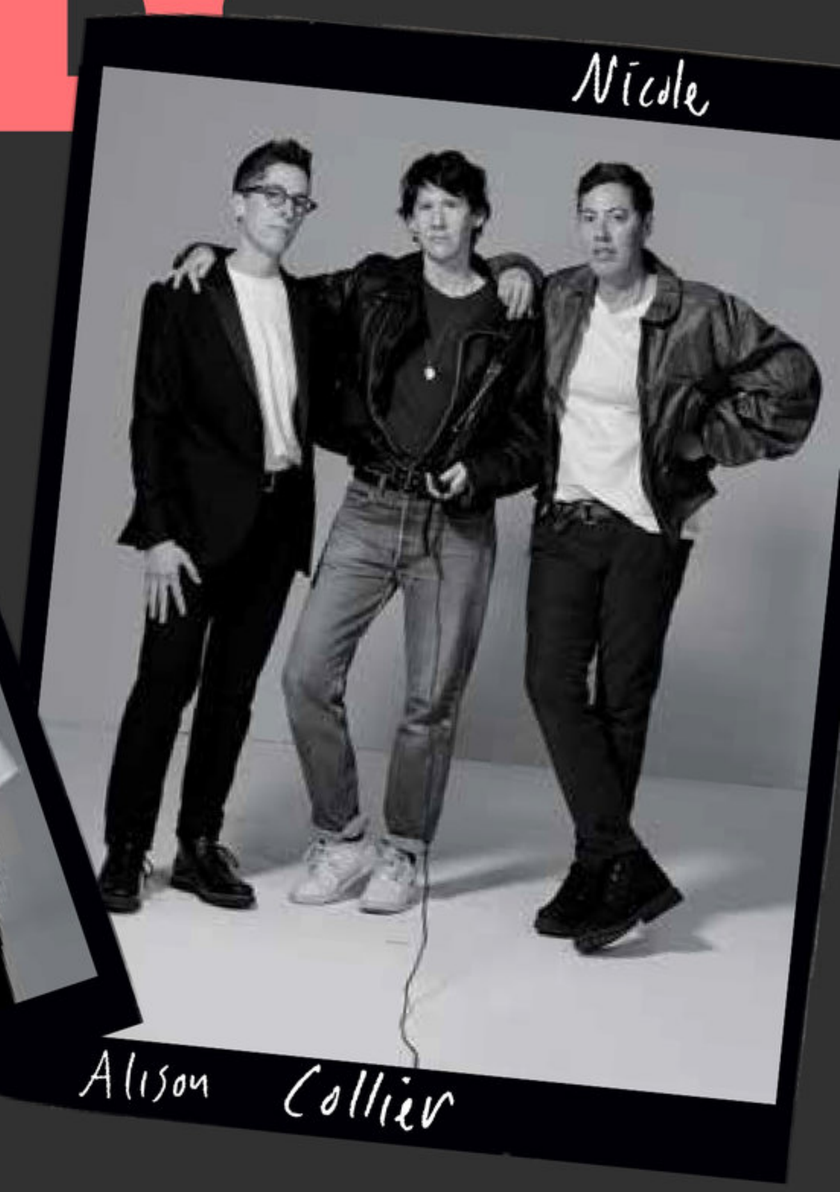
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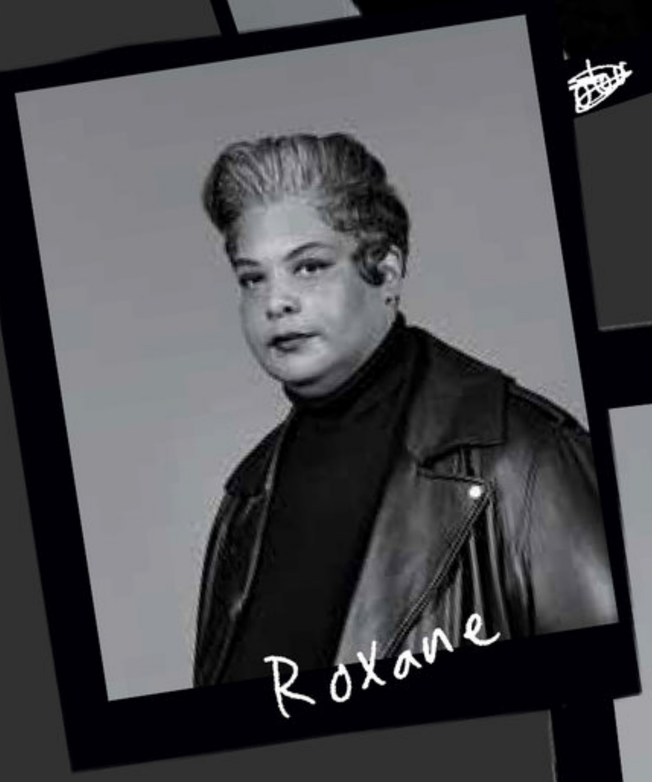
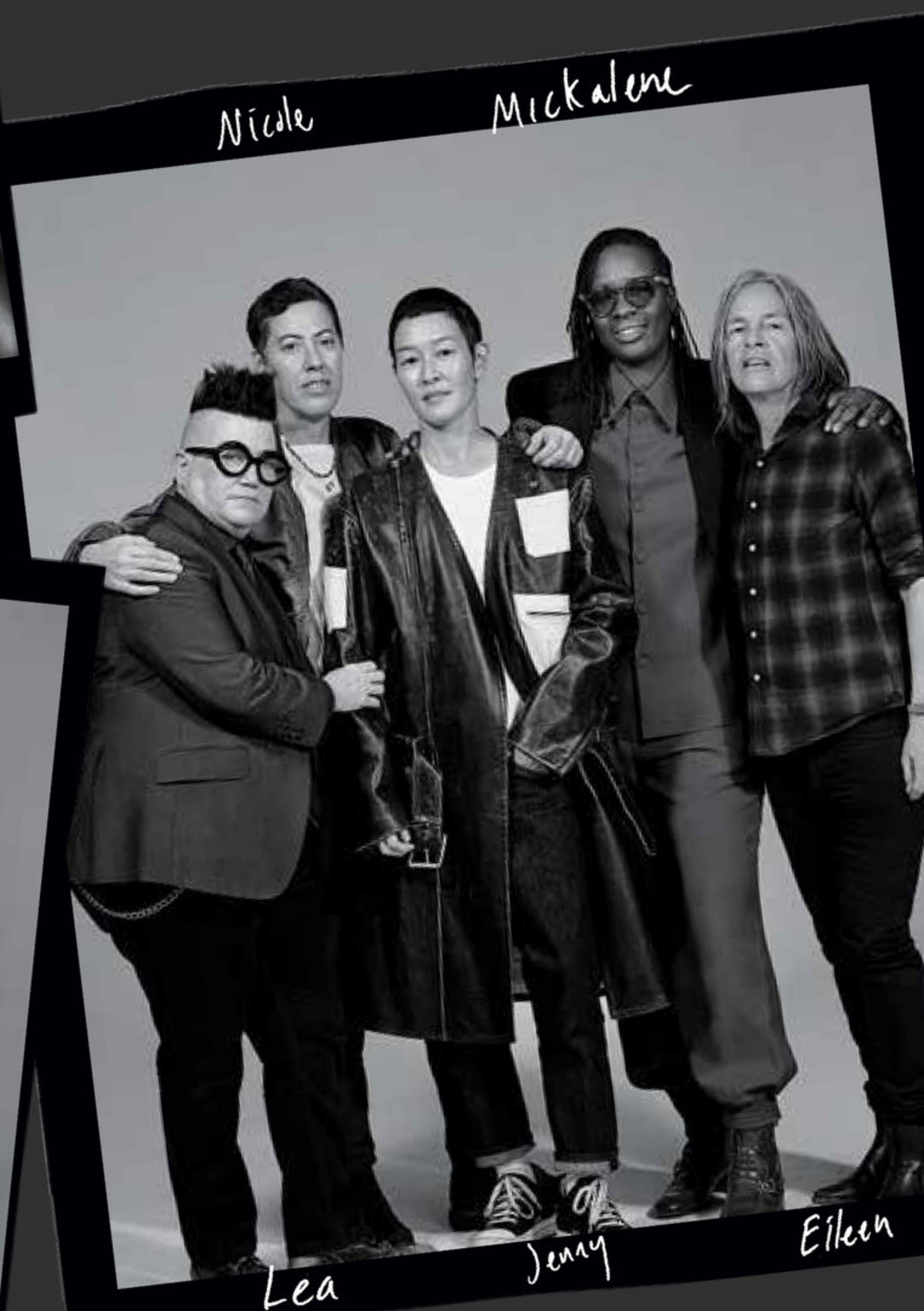

Roxane

Nicole Mickalene

United by sensibility, history, aesthetics and taste — the groups of people who make culture what it is

THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

Culture
April 19, 2020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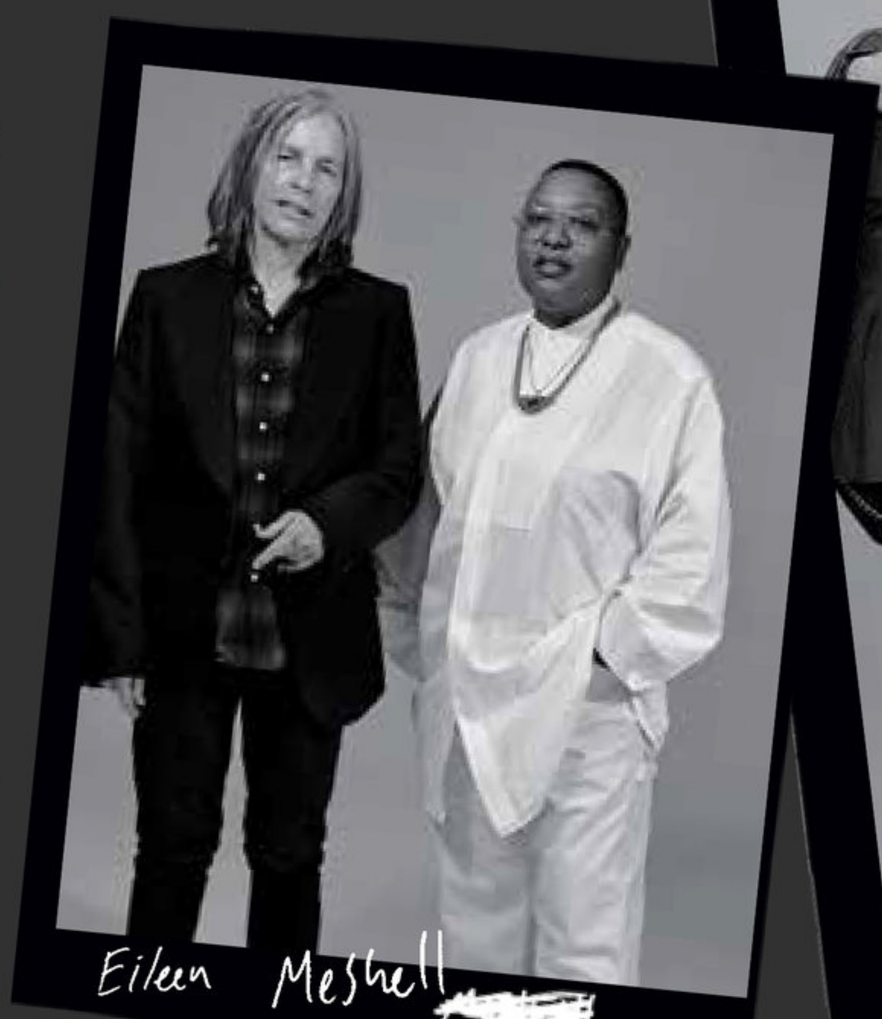
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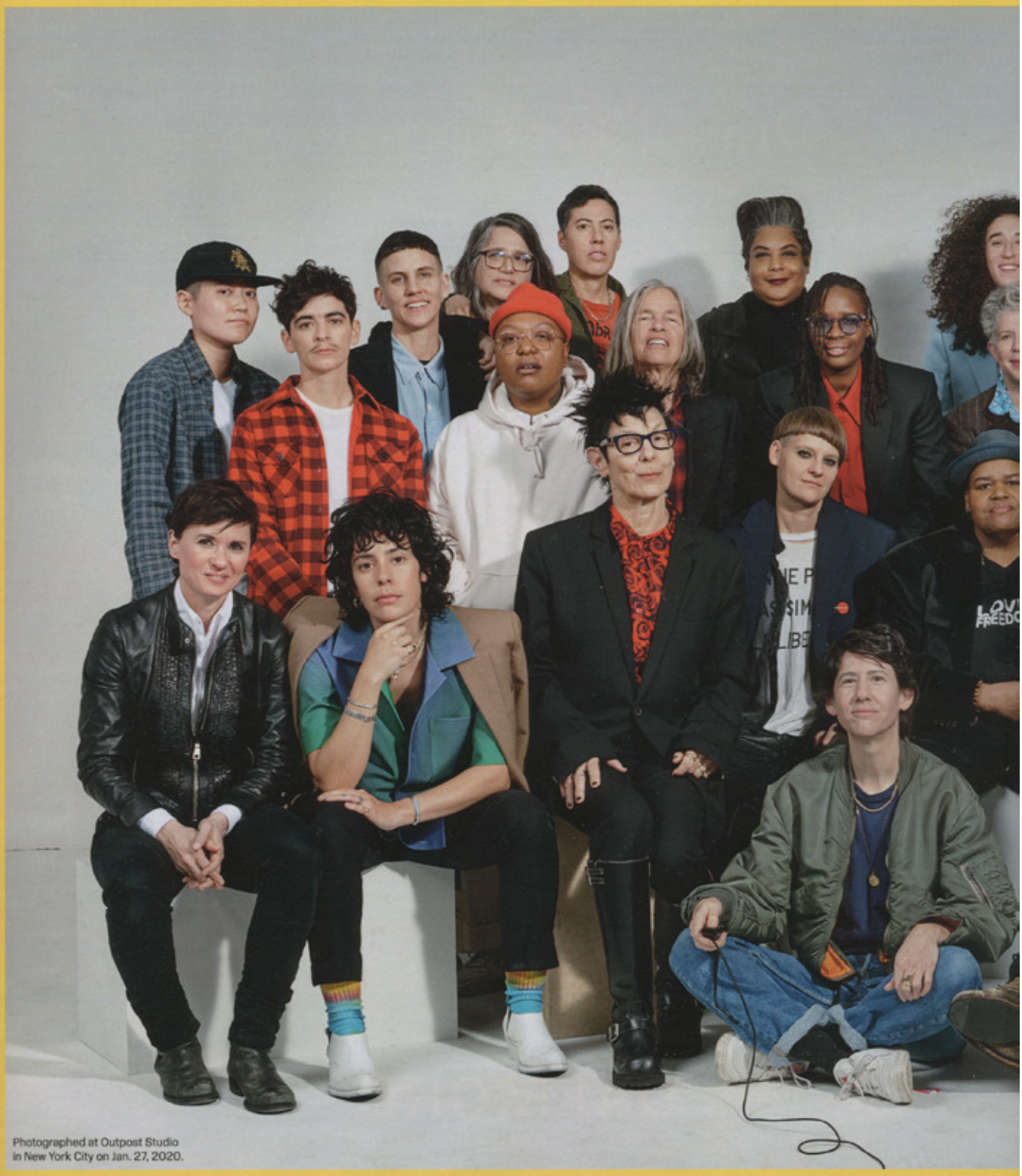
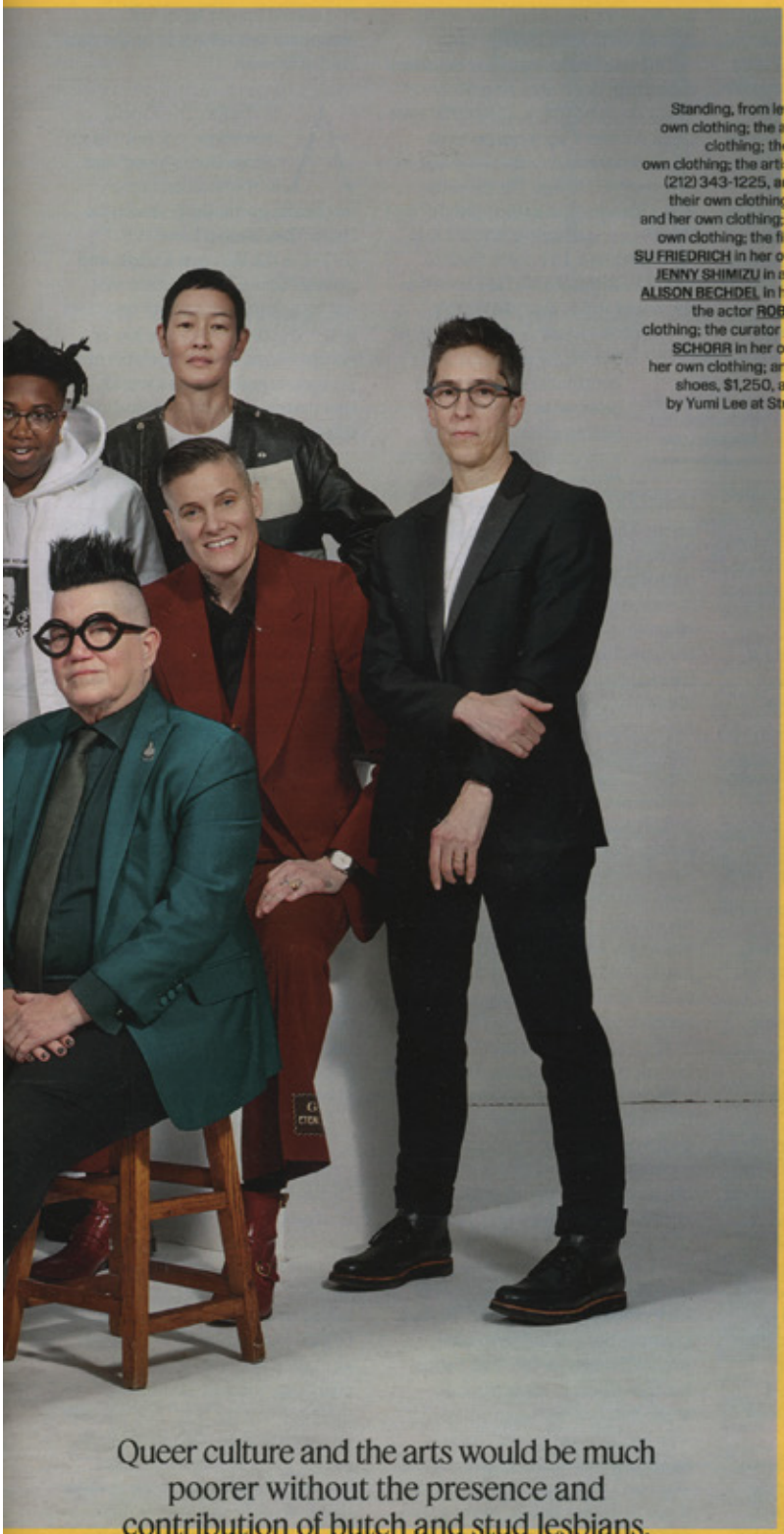


Photographed at Outpost Studio in New York City on Jan. 27, 2020.

The Renegade



Standing, from left: the writer **PATTY YUMI COTTRELL** in their own clothing; the musician **JD SAMSON** in h own clothing; the artist **A. K. BURNS** in a **Kwaidan Editions** jacket, $1,777, atelierneweyork.com, and her ow clothing; the artist **A. L. STEINER** in her own clothing; the musician **MESHELL NDEGEOCELLO** in h own clothing; the artist **NICOLE EISENMAN** in a vintage jacket, courtesy of What Goes Around Comes Aroun (212) 343-1225, and her own clothing; the writer **EILEEN MYLES** in a **Gucci** blazer, $3,500, gucci.com, an their own clothing; the writer **ROXANE GAY** in a **Universal Standard** jacket, $448, universalstandard.cor and her own clothing; the artist **MICKALENE THOMAS** in a **Balenciaga** jacket, $2,390, (212) 328-1671, and h own clothing; the filmmaker **LORENA RUSSI** in a **Lacoste** suit, price on request, lacoste.com; the filmmak **SU FRIEDRICH** in her own clothing; the artist **TIONA NEKKIA MCCLODDEN** in her own clothing; the actor-mod **JENNY SHIMIZU** in a **Raf Simons** coat, $5,495, doverstreetmarket.com, and her own clothing; and the writ **ALISON BECHDEL** in her own clothing. Seated, from left: the filmmaker **KIMBERLY PEIRCE** in her own clothin the actor **ROBERTA COLINDREZ** in her own clothing; the choreographer **ELIZABETH STREB** in her ow clothing; the curator **PATI HERTLING** in a **Balenciaga** coat, $2,990, and her own clothing; the artist **COLLIE SCHORR** in her own clothing; the musician **TOSHI REAGON** in her own clothing; the actor **LEA DELARIA** i her own clothing; and the writer **CASEY LEGLER** in a **Gucci** jacket, $3,200, vest, $1,200, pants, $980, an shoes, $1,250, and their own clothing. Hair by Tamas Tuzes at L'Atelier NYC and Latisha Chong. Makeu by Yumi Lee at Streeters. Set design by Jesse Kaufmann at Frank Reps. Photo production by Hen's Toot

Queer culture and the arts would be much poorer without the presence and contribution of butch and stud lesbians, whose identity is both its own aesthetic and a defiant repudiation of the male gaze.

By Kerry Manders Photograph by Collier Schorr
Styled by Brian Molloy Produced by Casey Legler

"BUTCH" HAS LONG been the name we've given a certain kind — *that* kind — of lesbian. The old adage applies: You know her when you see her. She wears men's clothing, short hair, no makeup. Butch is an aesthetic, but it also conveys an attitude and energy. Both a gender and a sexuality, butchness is about the body but also transcends it: "We exist in this realm of masculinity that has nothing to do with cis men — that's the part only we [butches] know how to talk about," says the 42-year-old writer, former Olympic swimmer and men's wear model Casey Legler. "Many people don't even know how to ask questions about who we are, or about what it means to be us."

Many of us wear the butch label with a certain self-consciousness, fearing the term doesn't quite fit — like a new pair of jeans, it's either too loose or too tight. The graphic novelist Alison Bechdel, 59, doesn't refer to herself as butch but understands why others do. "It's a lovely word, 'butch': I'll take it, if you give it to me," she says. "But I'm afraid I'm not butch enough to really claim it. Because part of being butch is *owning* it, the whole aura around it."

What does owning it look like? Decades before genderless fashion became its own style, butches were wearing denim and white tees, leather jackets and work boots, wallet chains and gold necklaces. It isn't just about what you're wearing, though, but how: Butchness embodies a certain swagger, a 1950s-inspired "Rebel Without a Cause" confidence. In doing so, these women — and butches who don't identify as women — created something new and distinct, an identity you could recognize even if you didn't know what to call it.

By refuting conventionally gendered aesthetics, butchness expands the possibilities for women of all sizes, races, ethnicities and abilities. "I always think of the first butch lesbian I ever saw," says the 33-year-old actor Roberta Colindrez. "This beautiful butch came into the grocery store and she was built like a brick house. Short hair, polo shirt, cargo pants and that ring of keys. . . . It was the first time I saw the possibility of who I was." And yet, to many people, "butch style" remains an oxymoron: There's a prevalent assumption that we're all fat, frumpy fashion disasters — our baseball caps and baggy pants suggest to others that we don't care about self-presentation. But it's not that we're careless; it's that unlike, say, the gay white men who have been given all too much credit for influencing contemporary visual culture, we're simply not out to appease the male gaze. We disregard and reject the confines of a sexualized and commodified femininity.

ETYMOLOGICALLY, "butch" is believed to be an abbreviation of "butcher," American slang for "tough kid" in the early 20th century and likely inspired by the outlaw Butch Cassidy. By the early 1940s, the word was used as a pejorative to describe "aggressive" or "macho" women, but lesbians reclaimed it almost immediately, using it with pride at 1950s-era bars such

as Manhattan's Pony Stable Inn and Peg's Place in San Francisco. At these spots, where cocktails cost 10 cents and police raids were a regular occurrence, identifying yourself as either butch or femme was a prerequisite for participating in the scene.

These butches were, in part, inspired by 19th-century cross-dressers — then called male impersonators or transvestites — who presented and lived fully as men in an era when passing was a crucial survival tactic. We can also trace butchness back to the androgynous female artists of early 20th-century Paris, including the writer Gertrude Stein and the painter Romaine Brooks. But it wasn't until the 1960s and early 1970s that butches, themselves at the intersection of the burgeoning civil, gay and women's rights movements, became a more visible and viable community.

From their earliest incarnations, butches faced brutal discrimination and oppression, not only from outside their community but also from within. A certain brand of (mostly white) lesbian feminism dominant in the late '70s and early '80s marginalized certain sorts of "otherness" — working-class lesbians, lesbians of color and masculine-of-center women. They pilloried butchness as inextricably misogynist and butch-femme relationships as dangerous replications of heteronormative roles. (Such rhetoric has resurfaced, as trans men are regularly accused of being anti-feminist in their desire to become the so-called enemy.) Challenged yet again to defend their existence and further define themselves, butches emerged from this debate emboldened, thriving in the late '80s and early '90s as women's studies programs — and, later, gender and queer studies departments — gained traction on North American and European college campuses.

The '90s were in fact a transformative decade for the butch community. In 1990, the American philosopher Judith Butler published her groundbreaking "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," and her theories about gender were soon translated and popularized for the masses. In her academic work, Butler argues that gender and sexuality are both constructed and performative; butch identity, as female masculinity, subverts the notion that masculinity is the natural and exclusive purview of the male body. Soon after, butch imagery infiltrated the culture at large. The August 1993 issue of Vanity Fair featured the straight supermodel Cindy Crawford, in a black maillot, straddling and shaving the butch icon K. D. Lang. That same year, the writer Leslie Feinberg published "Stone Butch Blues," a now classic novel about butch life in 1970s-era New York. In Manhattan, comedians such as Lea DeLaria and drag kings such as Murray Hill took to the stage; it was also the heyday of Bechdel's "Dykes to Watch Out For," the serialized comic strip she started in 1983. In 1997, Ellen DeGeneres, still the most famous of butches, came out. Two years later, Judith "Jack" Halberstam and Del LaGrace Volcano published "The Drag King Book" and the director Kimberly Peirce released her breakthrough film, "Boys Don't Cry"; its straight cisgender star, Hilary Swank, went on to win an Oscar for her portrayal of Brandon Teena, a role that still incites contentious debates about the nebulous boundaries between butch and trans identity. These artists and their legacies are the cornerstones of our community. As Legler says, "This is where we've come from, and the folks we look back to. If you identify with that lineage, then we'd love to have you."

To watch a documentary about butch culture, visit tmagazine.com.

LIKE ANY QUEER subculture, butchness is vastly different now than it was three decades ago — though the codes have been tweaked and refined over the years, younger butches continue to take them in new and varied directions: They may experiment with their personas from day to day, switching fluidly between masculine and feminine presentation. There are "stone butches," a label that doesn't refer to coldness, as is often assumed, but to a desire to touch rather than to be touched — to give rather than receive — and is considered slightly more masculine than "soft butch" on the Futch Scale, a meme born in 2018 that attempted to parse the gradations from "high femme" to "stone butch." ("Futch," for "femme/butch," is square in the middle.) And while there remains some truth to butch stereotypes — give us a plaid flannel shirt any day of the week — that once-static portrait falls apart under scrutiny and reflection. Not every butch has short hair, can change a tire, desires a femme. Some butches are bottoms. Some butches are bi. Some butches are boys.

Different bodies own their butchness differently, but even a singular body might do or be butch differently over time. We move between poles as our feelings about — and language for — ourselves change. "In my early 20s, I identified as a stone butch," says the 45-year-old writer Roxane Gay. "In adulthood, I've come back to butch in terms of how I see myself in the world and in my relationship, so I think of myself as soft butch now."

Peirce, 52, adds that this continuum is as much an internal as an external sliding scale: "I've never aspired to a binary," she says. "From day one, the idea of being a boy or a girl never made sense. The ever-shifting signifiers of neither or both are what create meaning and complexity."

Indeed, butch fluidity is especially resonant in our era of widespread transphobia. Legler, who uses they/them pronouns, is a "trans-butch identified person — no surgery, no hormones." Today, the interconnected spectrums of gender and queerness are as vibrant and diverse in language as they are in expression — genderqueer, transmasc, nonbinary, gender-nonconforming. Yet butches have always called themselves and been called by many names: bull dyke, diesel dyke, bulldagger, boi, daddy and so on. Language evolves, "flowing in time and changing constantly as new generations come along and social structures shift," Bechdel says.

If it's necessary to think historically, it's also imperative to think contextually. Compounding the usual homophobia and misogyny, black and brown butches must contend with racist assumptions: "Black women often get read as butch whether they are butch or not," Gay says. "Black women in general are not seen, so black butchness tends to be doubly invisible. Except for studs: They're very visible," she adds, referring to a separate but related term used predominantly by black or Latinx butches (though, unsurprisingly, white butches have appropriated it) who are seen as "harder" in their heightened masculinity and attitude. Gay notes that "people tend to assume if you're a black butch, you're a stud and that's it," which is ultimately untrue. Still, butch legibility remains a paradox: As the most identifiable of lesbians — femmes often "pass" as straight, whether they want to or not — we are nonetheless maligned and erased for our failure of femininity, our refusal to be the right kind of woman.

ANOTHER LINGERING stereotype, one born from "Stone Butch Blues" and its more coded literary forebears, particularly Radclyffe Hall's "The Well of Loneliness" (1928), is the butch as a tragic and isolated figure. She is either cast out by a dominant society that does not — will not — ever see her or accept her, or she self-isolates as a protective response to a world that continually and unrelentingly disparages her.

When a butch woman *does* appear in mainstream culture, it's usually alongside her other: the femme lesbian. Without the femme and the contrast she underscores, the butch is "inherently uncommodifiable," Bechdel says, since two butches together is just a step "too queer." We rarely see butches depicted *in* or *as* community, an especially sobering observation given the closure of so many lesbian bars over the past two decades. But when you talk to butches, a more nuanced story emerges, one of deep and abiding camaraderie and connection. Despite the dearth of representation, butch love thrives — in the anonymous, knowing glances across the subway platform when we recognize someone like us, and in the bedroom, too. "Many of my longest friendships are with people who register somewhere on the butch scale," Peirce says. "We're like married couples who fell in love with each other as friends."

Legler, for their part, recognizes a "lone wolf" effect, one in which some young queers initially love "being the only butch in the room." In organizing the group portrait that accompanies this essay over the past months, Legler was curious "what it would be like for butches to just show up together and to be able to display all of their power, all of their sexiness, all of their charisma, without having it be mitigated in some way." And not only for butches of an older generation, but for those still figuring things out, transforming the scene in ways that both defy and inspire their elders. "It's been centuries in the making, the fact that we are all O.K.," Legler adds. "That our bodies get to exist: We have to celebrate that. You can do more than just survive. You can *contribute*."