Erica Chi

Photography by *Justin Chung* & Styling by *Jesse Arifien*

Laura Rysman meets the woman standing in front of a very different sort of classroom.

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The sanctuary-like Los Angeles headquarters of Loom—a bright white box with sun-filled and soft-hued interiors—stands distinct from the surrounding single-story strip of drab, Mid-City commercial sprawl. It is a visibly fresh beacon extolling a new approach to sex, bodies and healthcare. A community and education center that opened in 2018, Loom is a for-profit enterprise, but its mission feels downright political in the face of America's current rights-limiting legislation and an increasingly negligent medical system.

"The body is political and how we're able to understand it has a political component," says Erica Chidi Cohen, the 32-year-old CEO of Loom who founded the company with Quinn Lundberg. "When people have body literacy and can advocate for themselves, they have better health outcomes. That's what women and people of color need." She speaks to me from across the planet, beamed from Los Angeles into my home in Tuscany nine time zones away but, forthright and self-possessed, Chidi Cohen is immediate enough that I feel I'm being schooled. I sit up straight.

Chidi Cohen is Loom's principal teacher, creating a curriculum that's reviewed for scientific accuracy by a community of ob-gyns and medical professionals, and informed by her 10 years working with women's health. It's information that's fact-based, but which evangelizes a new attitude. The author of *Nurture: A Modern Guide to Pregnancy, Birth, Early Motherhood—and Trusting Yourself and Your Body*, and the creator of the *Nurture* online birth course, Chidi Cohen's experience began when she became a doula and a founding member of the Birth Justice Project to help incarcerated women in San Francisco. "I liked that being a doula was more of an educational and emotional role, and not as focused on the clinical components of pregnancy and labor," she says, sitting at her home desk in a ribbed black tank dress and twisted gold chains, her bob of skinny locks bouncing as she munches on sliced cantaloupe. "The core skills of a doula are in educating people about their options," she says. It's a notion she's developed into a full-scale teaching center with Loom, where she's amplified her call for an empowered, egalitarian approach to women and their bodies.

"Education is so important because healthcare is letting women down," she says. Chidi Cohen thinks that our abbreviated medical visits inhibit open communication between doctors and patients. "And healthcare is not universal in the US, so who you get to see and what's

Previous: Erica wears a suit by Bassike and shoes by COS. Left: She wears a shirt by Rachel Comey and trousers by ALC. Right: She wears a blouse by Sylvia Tcherassi, trousers by COS, earrings by Rachel Comey and her own rings.

available to you depends on your socioeconomic situation. If we can't get people healthcare, we need to get them education so they can get the best from what they're going to encounter."

On May 21 this year, in response to anti-abortion regulations in 13 states, Loom joined six other female-led companies (Sustain, THINX, Dame, Cora, Clara Collection and Fur) to run a full-page ad in *The New York Times* proclaiming a woman's right to choose, and the business community's responsibility to support that right. "With the rollback of access, it was important to get ahead of it and make people understand that abortion is healthcare. It's a human rights issue," says Chidi Cohen. "As a black queer person, I really feel that the personal is political." Within its scope of offerings, Loom provides abortion support groups and connects women with abortion doulas. "We see it as part of the reproductive continuum, so it felt right to put the business in front of this issue. The reason that it's even an issue is that there's so little respect for women, and a deep desire to control and restrict women."

Chidi Cohen is vigilant about shifting semantics as well, rejecting common nomenclature like "natural birth," with its implication of a superior childbearing route, and "PMS," with its historical denigration of a woman at the whim of her hormones. "We're moving away from paternal terms," she says, as Nima, her darkly marbled Manx cat, jumps onto the desk. Chidi Cohen caresses him without breaking the flow of her thoughts: that new terminology, new ways of speaking about rote subjects help her open up new ways of thinking. "Health education requires a lot more poetry in terms of looseness with language," she says.

Loom classes introduce a new vocabulary (an example that she insists upon: "feeling luteal"—a reference to the post-ovulation phase of a woman's cycle—replaces "PMSing"). The space also fosters a frank, conversation-based style of instruction that comes easily to Chidi Cohen and galvanizes her participants. "People self-select when they decide to be in a class as adults," she points out. No one is there who doesn't want to be there, who isn't hoping to be inspired to participate in discussions. "My job as an educator is really to help create a container in the room where everyone feels the conversation is guided," she says. Chidi Cohen freely shares personal stories to let her students know "that I'm human and going through my own experience," talking about her own body, sex and her partnership with her husband, lawyer Jordy Cohen.

"What would it look like to have a matriarchal academia and work culture?"

Hair & Makeup: Nicole Whitman

Left: Erica wears a coat by COS and her own rings. Above: She wears a coat by COS.

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Her upbringing, split between South Africa and the United States, was guided by parents who were both clinicians—her father an endocrinologist, her mother a nurse. It was a household that encouraged "talking about the body and talking about fluids," she says. Perhaps not coincidentally, she found out from her father that her grandmother and great-grandmother in Nigeria were both midwives.

For the sex class at Loom, Chidi Cohen rounds out her discussions with prompts. In the beginning: What's a single word to describe how you feel about sex? And by the conclusion, when things have grown more comfortably provocative: What's one thing you think you're really good at when it comes to sex? In between, she instills what she calls "an antidote to hot sex-partner performance." This is not *Cosmo*. This is not about 10 tricks that will drive your lover wild. This is a class "about helping people understand that their primary sexual relationship is with themselves," says Chidi Cohen, ignoring Nima as he nuzzles her neck from the desktop. "How can you know yourself better? How can you feel more anchored in what turns you on and what doesn't?"

Much of it comes from modeling the behavior for students, she says, which means discussing how she takes pleasure for herself. A student once asked if masturbating on her stomach was abnormal, to which Chidi Cohen replied reassuringly that she'd also done it, and then others in the class concurred. She went on to explain that many women begin masturbating that way in order to put pressure on their vestibular bulbs, which rub against the clitoris—the clitoris being not just the hooded, pea-size glans, as many believe, but a much larger, wishbone-shaped network of erectile tissue that extends deep into the vagina. Desire, meet edification.

The class's curriculum promotes a startlingly clear picture of anatomy alongside how to unabashedly ask for and receive pleasure. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault famously criticized Western society for its obsession with *scientia sexualis*—a sterile and confessional science of sex, or "procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations

Left: Erica wears a turtleneck and coat by COS. Right: She wears a sweater by Bassike. Left: Erica wears a turtleneck and coat by COS. Right: She wears a sweater by Bassike.

Below: Erica wears a coat, trousers and shoes by COS. Right: She wears a suit by Bassike.

"Our culture is not permissive of being anything else than 100 percent optimal. Women need elasticity."

and the masterful secret." He criticized the lack of *ars erotica*, an esoteric erotic art where pleasure is considered "[not] by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself." But Chidi Cohen considers her work to be simultaneously revealing the antiseptic, scientific truths of sex and its voluptuous, often censored codes. "I like to mix the two," she says. "All of those things need to speak to each other: science, anatomy and the emotion of pleasure. A scientific framework can give you permission that you wouldn't give yourself."

Other Loom classes equally endeavor to shake off convention. "What makes our pregnancy classes popular and revolutionary is that we're not necessarily creating a hierarchy around birth," says Chidi Cohen. All childbearing options are equal and presented in detail. "One of the most feminist decisions you can make is to decide how you want to feel in labor," she says. (Loom students are majority female, but men join in the pregnancy class to support their partners, and attend the parenting class as well.)

The course on periods, functioning "like cognitive behavioral therapy," says Chidi Cohen, is "an invitation to reimagine your relationship with your menstrual cycle." Designed to shift the menstruation paradigm to incorporate awareness of the entire month-long hormonal cycle ("bleed to bleed," Chidi Cohen calls it), the class mitigates the shame and stress most women have at some point associated with their period in favor of openness, with a biological and emotional comprehension of what's happening to the body. "Who you are in your pre-ovulatory phase and who you are in your post-ovulatory phase are very different. That's what's in your hormones," Chidi Cohen explains. I make note and silently pledge to start paying attention to this previously ignored personal calendar of hormonal changes.

"Our culture is not permissive of being anything else than 100 percent optimal at all times, but women need elasticity," she says. "It's not normal for women to feel 100 percent all the time." Phrased in less upbeat language, this is a sentiment that I had long shuddered at, and that men have not infrequently used to justify the exclusion of women from positions as top professionals. I'm just 10 years older than Chidi Cohen, but the feminism I was reared on glowered at any mention of hormonal vulnerability. We were taught to be steel. We were taught to be men. Yet despite the retrograde misogyny on full view in the current political arena, women have gained a decade of ground, and there's more hard-won space for female reality today, some of it being undoubtedly cemented by projects like Loom and the voices it encourages.

The conversation among women like Chidi Cohen is no longer about taking over the system but recasting the system entirely. "To be a successful woman has meant divorce from the body," she tells me. "The roles were designed around the patriarchy, and men don't have the same hormonal variability. Things aren't set up to support the matriarchy." Nima paws her shoulder, looking for attention, but Chidi Cohen will not be distracted. "How do we get cisgender men to gatekeep this info and understand its importance? How do we rebuild environments to absorb our normal functions?" she asks, her eyes widening in earnestness as she nudges the cat to the side. "What would it look like to have a matriarchal academia and a matriarchal work culture?" A revolution is brewing. I hope I get to see it too.