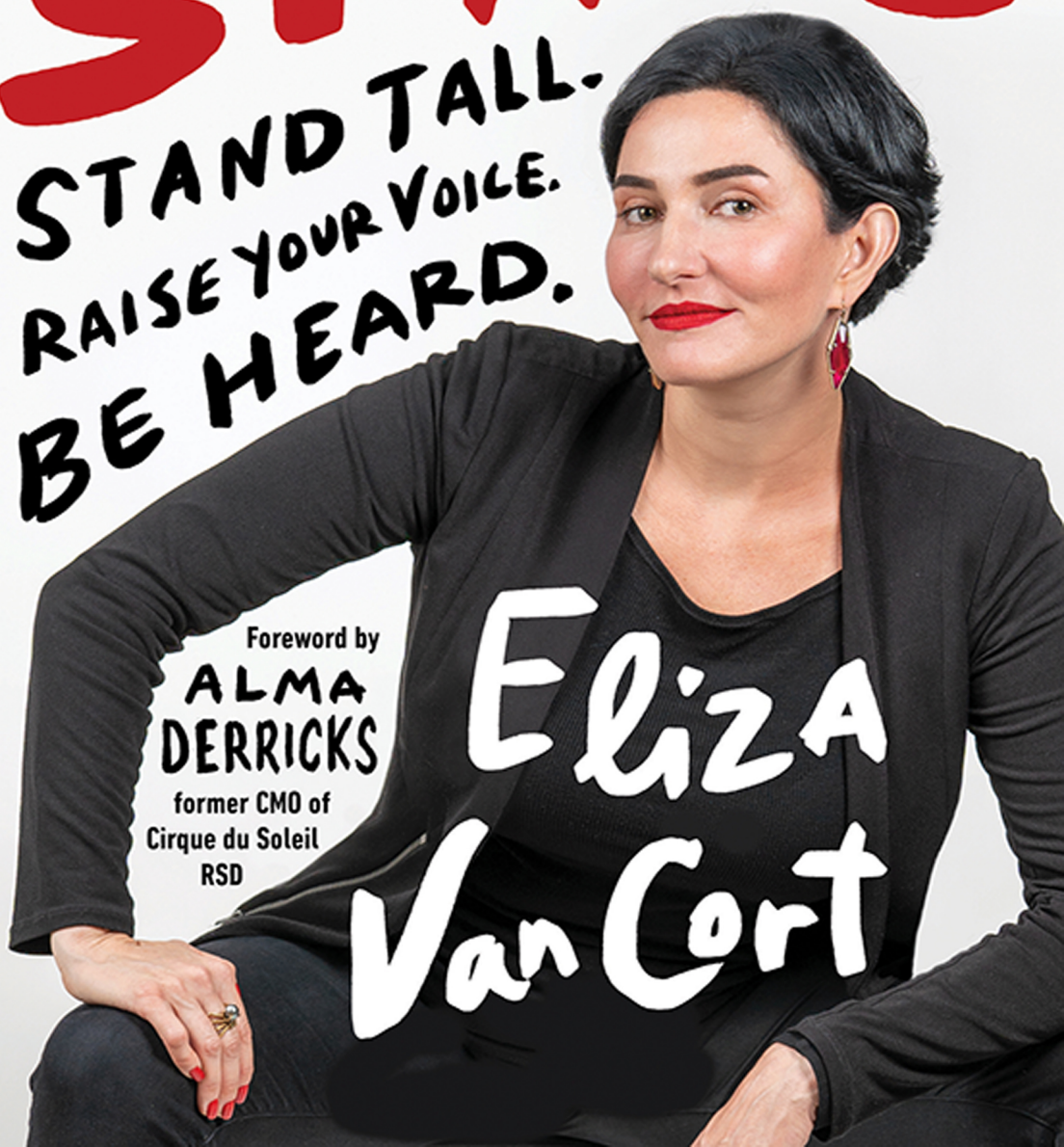


A Woman's Guide to **CLAIMING SPACE**

STAND TALL.
RAISE YOUR VOICE.
BE HEARD.

Foreword by
**ALMA
DERRICKS**
former CMO of
Cirque du Soleil
RSD

**Eliza
Van Cort**



More Praise for *A Woman's Guide to Claiming Space*

"If a book was a hug, a high five, and a help session all in one, it would be Eliza VanCort's book. VanCort shares her hard-earned lessons and heart-filled advice in this intersectional guidebook that will help women empower themselves and become 'good-ish' allies to others. I will be sharing it with my students, friends, and daughters."

—**Dolly Chugh, author of *The Person You Mean to Be* and Associate Professor, New York University Stern School of Business**

"This book digs deep into how we can bravely 'claim space' at work—physically through posture and voice—but also emotionally, behaviorally, and energetically by creating the types of networks and connections that break glass ceilings and elevate us. All of these aspects of power and bravery are essential if we want to live and work as we dream to. This powerful, comprehensive guidebook is for every woman and every leader who wishes to access concrete tools to stop apologizing for being human, for being herself, or for things that aren't her fault, and to claim her space in the world while owning her own worthiness to achieve her ultimate potential."

—**Kathy Caprino, Career and Leadership Coach, Senior Forbes Contributor, author of *The Most Powerful You* and host of the Finding Brave podcast**

"A combination of big ideas and concrete, actionable advice, this powerful guidebook delivers transformative value to women in their twenties and thirties striving to make our mark and make a difference in the world. It's the road map we wish we had when launching our careers and a critical call to action for women to unite across differences to drive change."

—**Octavia Abell and Kyleigh Russ, cofounders of Govern for America and *Forbes* 30 Under 30 honorees**

"As a father who values self-sufficiency, confidence, and strength, I'll be giving this book to my teenage daughters! It's absolutely a must-read!"

—**Joe De Sena, founder and CEO, Spartan Race, and bestselling author of *Spartan Up!* and *Spartan Fit!***

"Women who want to be their most empowered selves both at home and at work, while raising up the women around them, must read this book!"

—**Christine Guest, Associate Professor, Ithaca College; Emmy-nominated filmmaker; and producer of the award-winning documentary *The Women of Titmouse Animation***

"Women of every race and background who want to claim space confidently and unapologetically will find concrete answers and edifying inspiration. Challenging, motivating, and transformative."

—**Misty Monroe, actor, educator, and creator of the award-winning, critically acclaimed one-woman show *Unapologetically Black***

"This book is as warm, authentic, empathetic, funny, and edifying as Eliza's (in-person) talks and seminars. I respect Eliza's works, and more importantly, the students I work with in higher education have truly benefited from her transformative practical advice, tools, and resources for years. With this important book, the world has access to her as well."

—**DiOnetta Jones Crayton, Associate Dean and Director, Office of Minority Education, Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

"There are those that consciously or unconsciously try to diminish the voices of women as well as Black, Indigenous, and other people of color of any gender. Eliza presents us with powerful and practical strategies we can use to be our own champions and better champions of others as we individually and collectively claim our space to be heard."

—**Sara Xayarath Hernández, Associate Dean for Inclusion and Student Engagement, Cornell University Graduate School**

"This welcome book is a warm, funny, and genuinely edifying resource that combines big ideas with real-world strategies. VanCort seamlessly emphasizes both transformative individual growth and the power of intersectional engagement."

—**Andrew Chignell, PhD, Laurence S. Rockefeller Professor, University Center for Human Values, Princeton University, and Codirector, Hope and Optimism project**

"As a non-binary trans person who has dedicated my life to educating people about gender diversity, it was refreshing to see a book that does not rigidly define gender and does not exclude all but the White straight cis woman from the conversation. The advice VanCort gives is often universal, will help people of all genders help themselves, and perhaps more importantly, will help each of us amplify each other."

—**Shelley Roth, entrepreneur, consultant, and five time author, including, *A Field Guide to Gender Neutral Language* and *Don't Call Me "Ma'am"***

"Eliza VanCort is on a mission to empower every woman to claim her space. With insightful wisdom and actionable advice, she shows you how to be seen and heard with confidence and to embrace that there is enough room for every woman to succeed. Eliza shows you how to take power and seed power to honor intersectionality and claim space for all women. I'm gifting her book to my women friends and colleagues—this is a must read!"

—**Caroline Dowd-Higgins, author of *This Is Not the Career I Ordered* and *Thrive Where You Are*, host of *Your Working Life* podcast**

"This is a must read for every college-aged woman who wants real guidance on how to be a real, kick-ass woman."

—**Kieren Munson-Burke, college student**

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BK

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

A Woman's Guide to Claiming Space

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Mary Louise Marini VanCort
was a brilliant writer.
Her life was cut short.
Her story was never told.
She told me I could do anything.
I claim this space for her.
Thank you, Mom.

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FOREWORD

A WOMAN'S GUIDE TO CLAIMING SPACE is the empowering, honest, and no-nonsense how-to manual that I wish I'd had on my nightstand twenty-five years ago. And again fifteen years ago. And once more about six months ago. Eliza has lived many lives, claimed many spaces, and helped countless women embrace their superpowers. With uncommon wisdom, grace, and grit, she brings a hug-kick-thunderclap that every woman needs in her life. Again and again and again.

Before I ran away and joined the circus, I considered myself a pretty sharp, savvy, and accomplished executive. Over two decades, I'd seen entire industries come and go. I'd built new businesses for some of the most beloved brands in the world. With raucous stories to share about Klingons, Blue Men, Dilbert, Snoopy, and even Chuck D, I was accustomed to being a pretty captivating cocktail party guest. But in the shiny, raunchy, and otherworldly fishbowl of Las Vegas, all of my resolve, my wits, and even my physical well-being would be stressed to the limit.

Under the big top, I discovered an odd metaphorical kinship with the extraordinary artists I was honored to call my colleagues. Contortionists' impossible backbends seemed startlingly familiar; so did the breathless high stakes of the high wire, stilt walking, juggling, plate spinning, sword swallowing, and fire breathing.

Definitely fire breathing.

It was my father who first taught me to inhale and exhale fire. Because he didn't have the words to tell me otherwise, he taught

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me the exact lessons he would have shared with a son: how to be brave, outspoken, ambitious, and more than a little conspicuous. Because I am my father's child, I ultimately soared to heights I never could have imagined in those early years. But because I am my father's *brown* and *female* child, I had to learn for myself that presenting with such force wasn't always welcome.

Despite his very best intentions, this is the part that he couldn't completely understand: building a meaningful life and living is tricky enough, but for a woman, like Ginger Rogers waltzing with Fred Astaire, doing it backward and in high heels is a bitch.

Space claiming is not for the faint of heart. And, depending on how many matching pieces of luggage you happen to be carrying with you—and the height of your sassy stilettos—the road can be long, narrow, and very steep. I perpetually carry the heaviest pieces strapped to my back. Other pieces at least have a wheel or two so I can drag them behind me with a little less effort. And, without question, there are many others who carry a much heavier load than I ever will. But the fundamental challenges that *A WOMAN'S GUIDE TO CLAIMING SPACE* addresses are universal. And Eliza's blessedly practical life lessons are right on time.

In a small world, standing tall is a threat. Daring to live out loud and question norms can activate intense opposition, fear, and jealousy from both men and, regrettably, other women. Stand tall anyway.

In a chauvinist world, raising your voice is an affront. Refusing to accept suffocating limitations will inevitably be branded destabilizing, immoral, and even dangerous. Raise your voice anyway.

And at a moment when we need the boldest, most compassionate, and supremely kick-ass leaders we can find, making yourself heard isn't really optional. A restless and desperate world is waiting for you to unfurl your cape and answer the call.

Among many other passions, Eliza and I share a reverence for Maya Angelou. As you stake your claim to your space, it's only fitting to center her powerful voice: "Each of us has that right, that

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possibility, to invent ourselves daily. If a person does not invent herself, she will be invented.”

Throw your head back. Strike a pose. And never ever let yourself be silenced.

ALMA DERRICKS

Former CMO, Cirque du Soleil RSD

Founder of REV

Los Angeles, California

August 14, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Unapologetic Bravery: How to Fly without a Cape

Be your own hero, and claim space without apology.

When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.

—AUDRE LORDE

For years I was afraid to be my own hero. I was waiting for someone, anyone, to fly out of the sky, à la Superman in that first movie with Christopher Reeve, and scoop me up . . . just like Lois Lane! (She was so pretty! I wanted to be *just* like her!) Eventually, however, I began to question if this was a solid and stable life strategy. Waiting for Superman to emerge from the sky and take you on a joyride, when you have zero flying skills yourself, is problematic . . . to say the least. What if he has to drop you off somewhere because there's some sort of crisis? You really have no control over *where* Superman drops you before flying off to save the world. And not only are you stuck in some random place, say Antarctica, but you can't really help him solve the crises. So, Superman will go off and have exciting adventures without you. He will set the terms of which crises get priority and how to solve them. He'll be the hero. Meanwhile, you'll be freezing your ass

off with a bunch of penguins, praying he'll remember to come get you when he's done. Eventually I came to this conclusion: Nah. Lois can have him.

After reconsidering my dreams of being Lois, I decided if I wanted to fly like a superhero, I would have to become one myself. Until I was in my forties, I didn't fully understand my biggest barrier. It wasn't that I didn't come from Amazonia, or that I had no cape—although both would be total badassery. The barrier I faced could be summed up in two words.

Claiming Space

To claim space is to live the life of your choosing unapologetically and bravely. It is to live life the way you've always wanted. Your choices become yours. Your life is yours. To claim space is to never apologize for being the rule-breaking, rule-making badass/superhero/boss lady that you are. Not once. Not ever.

How I Cracked the Code to Claiming Space (Hint: Don't Text and Drive)

By the time I was a teenager, I had become a pretty damn good communicator, but I was also a master of ceding space. Somewhere deep down I believed that to stay safe, my true self had to stay invisible, so I used tactics women have been taught are acceptable. I flirted. I acted dumber than I was. I stated my opinion with apologies and questions. I often waited patiently for "my turn" to talk, while the young men at the table talked over me with impunity. I was getting the job done, but I was shrinking, losing a small piece of my power with every victory.

Then something miraculous happened. A car slammed into my head while I was riding my bike. I fully realize you may be thinking right now that I'm a bit nuts. Isn't getting hit in the head with a car a bad thing? Well, yes, it was. Indeed, it was really bad for a while. But it ended up being a good thing too—it transformed my life.

INTRODUCTION

Here's what happened: The driver, while texting and driving, ran a red light. (Please don't text while you're supposed to be driving. Not ever.) After the car hit my body, I was thrown onto the hood, my head smashing into the hard metal. Then, unconscious, I bounced off her car like a rag doll, into the air, and landed on the ground. That's when I smashed the other side of my head on the asphalt. I woke up with a bilateral brain injury and bleeding in my head, otherwise known as a subdural hematoma. My world was turned upside down.

The oddest thing about what happened was how strangely everyone acted toward me. When people stopped behaving quite so peculiarly, I asked my dear friend about it: "Kim, why is everyone acting *so weird*?" Her answer shocked me. Everyone else wasn't acting weird; I was.

I had been talking painfully slowly and my once-rich vocabulary was basically gone. I was terrified. All my passions, all my work, had involved my communication skills, and now I couldn't communicate. My mother, once a brilliant poet, writer, and beloved English teacher, had developed paranoid schizophrenia in her late twenties—trapped in her own mind. My deepest fear was that something might go wrong with my brain—it was my waking nightmare. Now, I was living it.

My intuition had always guided my communication. The accident seemed to have knocked that right out of my head. If I wanted my life back, I would have to rebuild my communication skills by meticulously breaking them down into component parts and then mindfully rebuilding from the ground up, brick by brick.

I began to watch . . . everything. Why are some people heard and others ignored? What makes a sentence compelling? How do people cede power? Take power? Make people happy? Scare people? How do they inspire?

I tired easily, so watching wasn't as terrible as it would have been before my accident. When groups of dear friends visited, my ability to keep talking eventually faded. That's when I would watch. During my solitary moments, I researched voraciously.

Then the day came when I could finally tolerate leaving my house. I'd always loved people watching, but I did it more closely now, analyzing every tiny detail.

That woman sitting quietly in the coffee shop, sipping tea and reading the *Times* . . . why didn't anyone approach her? What signs did she give off that allowed her to read in peace? And that equally attractive woman at the table next to her . . . seemingly doing the same thing. Why did she have to fend off two men who tried to strike up unwanted conversations within a span of only twenty minutes? And why did it take her so long to shut each of them down?

I thought, and I watched, and I questioned, and I read, and I thought some more. The women who fared best in work and in life were, without question, masters at claiming space. But what did that mean?

At first I didn't have a full understanding of what that meant; I just knew "claiming space" kept popping into my mind. The fiercer, more successful, and happier a woman was, the more of a badass space claimer she was. What was the one quality that allowed a woman to be visible without apology, to claim space like it was her damn job? There had to be a magic bullet, one simple, clear answer for how to do it. Eventually, I came to this inevitable conclusion: there wasn't. That would have been great! But alas, we live in the real world, a world with complex problems calling for real, nuanced, and innovative solutions.

In the end, I figured out space-claiming queens understand the importance of five distinct qualities.

CLAIM PHYSICAL SPACE: BOW TO NO ONE!

Communicate powerfully with your voice and your body.

To claim space is to have great posture and speak with confidence. Know where your body is in space, always. The story your physicality and voice tells can clearly project confidence and strength.

INTRODUCTION

CLAIM SPACE COLLABORATIVELY: AMPLIFY EACH OTHER!

Forge relationships that uplift you.

Claiming space is not a solitary activity. Carefully attend to your friendships, cultivate your professional relationships, lean on other women, and help other women. Create and nurture effective, powerful “old girl” networks.

NEVER CEDE YOUR SPACE: NEUTRALIZE YOUR KRYPTONITE!

Stop damaging patterns of self-sabotage.

Claiming space requires more than the physical. It means looking carefully at your past, identifying and knowing your pain points. Are you susceptible to dangerous, toxic relationships? Do you have impostor syndrome? Gaining an understanding of what can bring you to your knees will allow you to work toward never self-sabotaging again.

CLAIM SAFETY IN ANY SPACE: SHUT IT DOWN!

Thwart aggressors and protect yourself.

Claiming space means refusing to put up with interruptions, mansplaining, microaggressions, and other behaviors. You can achieve this in different ways—by cultivating an ally or through direct intervention yourself, you can learn how to shut them down.

CLAIM SPACE UNITED: COMMIT TO INTERSECTIONALITY!

Create a better world for us all.

Unless you are claiming space for all women, you are not claiming space. It demands solidarity and unity. Approach work and life with an open mind and heart. Listen to, believe, and advocate for other women. When we rise together, we rise so much higher.

A full life is a life of continuous discovery, growth, and change. Wise women understand they can never really master

all of the five qualities. Instead, they accept their shortcomings while at the same time striving to achieve mastery. These women are unstoppable forces. Their ability to powerfully claim space serves as their anchor during life's inevitable storms and their wings when taking flight, reaching for the impossible.

Claim space without apology and you are a damn superhero—a fierce woman in control who makes things happen.

The How-To

These five categories are powerful umbrella concepts for more granular life challenges. For example, take physicality/voice. You can't just tell someone, "Hey, go out and claim physical space and use your voice like Beyoncé! *Good luck!*" The component parts of control over your body and voice must be broken down, understood, and mastered: posture, voice, physicality, messaging, and phrasing. Once you master those skills, however, you will own that category. A macrolevel discussion of each category and explicit, detailed how-to advice on those granular changes are what this book is all about.

Deep down, each of us once believed we could do anything, just like the boys. When we were little girls, we imagined a world that would receive us on our merits, a world that would be fair, a world that would never ask us to be small, to shrink, to diminish ourselves to survive. Time, and the world, showed us a different truth. Yet we continue to work for that world we imagined for ourselves, because giving up is not an option. And each time one woman is knocked down, gets back up again, refuses to become invisible, we all become a little wiser, a little stronger. We come a little closer to that world. We must work to throw out the rules that held our grandmothers and mothers down. We must fight to rewrite those rules so they never hold us or our daughters down. A world where every woman can claim space without apology or fear is a world worth fighting for.

Conversations in the Bathroom

I was going to call this book *Conversations in the Bathroom*. The women's bathroom, which tragically is still not universally open to our trans sisters, can be a space like no other, transforming strangers into trusted old friends, lowering our guard in ways unthinkable at bus stops or cocktail parties. After giving my talks, when my mic has been turned off, leadership has shaken my hand one last time, and my work has officially "ended," the second Q&A in the bathroom invariably begins. It can be cramped, and often it smells like, well, a bathroom, but none of us seem to notice. Experiences are shared and questions are asked. It's been such an honor to hear every last story from each exceptional woman, even if it means almost missing my flight home on the regular. My bathroom Q&A record is almost two hours . . . I didn't regret a minute of it.

Yet I understand the reason we have to huddle in the bathroom is that so many of us don't feel safe claiming space outside of it. Until women, as a collective, master the five ways to claim space, we never will. (This includes raising our voices against the exclusion of our trans sisters from women's bathrooms. When any woman is unsafe in a space, we all lose.)

This book is a detailed guide to space claiming, which is a hell of a lot more rewarding, fun, and empowering than freezing your ass off in Antarctica with penguins, waiting for Superman to save you. It will empower us all to stand tall in the face of fear, raise our united voices, and be heard even in situations that traditionally would silence us. It was inspired by my journey and informed research, and created for all women. It owes a lot to my clients' experiences, and those wonderful moments throughout the world I've spent huddled around a bathroom sink, engaging in real sister-to-sister talk. I wrote it envisioning a busy woman going to the index and saying, "Damn, I'm struggling with [insert space-claiming issue] today. I know there's got to be a chapter on this!" And lo and behold, there it is! She reads