

## "A GREAT BIG WOMEN OF COLOR TENT:" BLANCHE JACKSON AND MAAT DOMPIM

Merril Mushroom

"Maat is the name of the ancient African Goddess who represents balance, truth, and justice; Dompim means a place in the bush where the voice of the Goddess is heard."

—*Maize* 45 (Summer 1995): 7

**B**lanche Jackson is a Landyke of great brilliance, eccentricity, and perseverance. Born in Brooklyn, New York, she has lived in several places and had a wide variety of life experiences. In spite of hardships, she maintains a positive perspective. Among her many talents, she is a wonderful storyteller.

I met Blanche at Sivananda Yoga Ashram in Val Morin, Québec, in 1966. I was in my shower singing "Sleeping Bee" when someone joined in from the other side of the bathroom wall. "Who the hell else knows *that* song?" I wondered. That was Blanche, and the beginning of a friendship where we have bounced in and out of each other's lives many times. (Maintaining contact with traveling women was much more difficult in the "old days" before digital technology, when we depended on the US Postal Service's deliveries and pay telephones.)

She has worked as a file clerk, senior clerk, supervising clerk, administrative assistant, UPS driver, bank messenger, office assistant, warehouse laborer, MR house counselor, halfway house "gatekeeper," library aide, yoga teacher, gardener, small trucker, craftswoman, thrift shop manager, census worker, school bus aide, and companion. She has done lectures and workshops, run a cultural crafts and merchandising business, and distributed a line of Mountain Mama spices.

In the early 1970s, Blanche moved from her New York City apartment into a loft. "I needed a loft to train myself for country living,"<sup>1</sup> she says. She planted a garden on the roof and fertilized it with horse manure that she hauled from the police stable nearby. She had bought an old bread truck that she named Mariposa, and started Wonder Wimmin Trucking. She hauled vegetables for the People's Warehouse (a collection of neighborhood co-ops), the Integral Yoga Health Food Store, etc.

In an unpublished memoir, Blanche tells this story of going to a women's concert in 1976:

After it was over, there was a request for someone with a truck to help return rented equipment. I charged rudely to the stage for fear someone would beat me to it. (Yeah right.) Soon I was a working member of Lesbian Feminist Liberation. LFL published "The Feminist," produced dances, concerts (including the one I had attended), and discussion events, all of which were massively attended, but usually about six of us showed up for work meetings. If I remember correctly there was one Native American womyn and two of us identified as Black.

In the late 1970s, Blanche and a girlfriend showed up out of nowhere at my remote Tennessee hill farm. She had taken a notion to come visit me from New York City. With no GPS to tell her where I lived, she arrived in the nearby town, went to the local post office, and asked for directions to my house, which she was given.

In the early 1980s, Blanche went to a Quaker Lesbian conference at Heathcote community in Maryland. Heathcote was looking for new members, and Blanche and her partner Amoja, wanting to garden on the earth whereof they walked instead of the roof where they lived, moved there. They had a garden and grew gourds that they crafted into shakerees (percussion instruments) with fishing line and beads. They sold the first half-

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from an unpublished memoir written for this issue. Much of the background reported here, before Maat Dompim, is paraphrased from that memoir.

dozen immediately at a music festival, and thus was born Market Wimmin, their cultural crafts and merchandising business, which also published Amoja's book *Cultural Etiquette: A Guide for the Well-Intended* (1990).

They began to travel the festival circuit, selling their merchandise and doing workshops and seminars. Here Blanche picks up the story.<sup>2</sup>

We were going to Michigan [Womyn's Music Festival] and North East Women's Music Retreat (NEWMR) every year. . . . Women of color who worked at both of those festivals would have a meeting under a tree at NEWMR every year to go over their experiences. The first year I went, the topic came up that, you know, you see a sister on the path, and then you never see her again, because there's 3000 people there. First we thought of having a women of color campground, but that seemed too much like segregated housing. So somebody said, what about a resource tent for women of color who want to connect or who want to share cultural stuff? We'd have reading materials and all that. So everybody agreed that's what we wanted, a resource tent.

. . . .

Amoja and some other women contacted both festivals about this resource tent. NEWMR said yes right away. Michigan thought it would be divisive—we should all be sisters together, melded and everything. . . . I kept both festivals up to date on my efforts to transport lower income wimmin, which resulted in five vans to NEWMR and three to Michigan. At Michigan, the vans were incorporated into the shuttle system. Amoja and some other people went and negotiated really hard at Michigan . . . , and they got half of a tent, I think the political tent. It overflowed. Women flocked to it. Michigan the next year gave us a small tent, and they

overflowed that, and so the tents grew bigger. Those tents are where the discussions took place about what women of color want. If there was women of color land, what would they want?

. . . .

We had been doing workshops at women's festivals about women's land and what women would want in a land site. The way I thought about it personally was not so much that it was women of color land, as that it was land that reflected the cultures and values of women of color. Personally, I didn't care who came, but I wanted the culture and the atmosphere to be reflective of many cultures. Not only Black—I meant diasporic African, African-American, Native American, Latina, Asian. I wanted to do something that offered something to all of those groups.



Photo courtesy of Womonwrites

Amoja Three Rivers at Womonwrites, 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> This and all subsequent quotations are from a recorded telephone interview that Rose Norman did with Blanche Jackson on July 20, 2014.

If we're going to have women of color land, we don't want it to be twenty women sitting around negotiating who's going to do the laundry or cook dinner that night. I wanted a place where individual women, where as many women as possible could use it. We needed a system, and a structure, and a game plan that would accommodate a *flow of women* rather than a static community. This was hard to convey. People kept asking me about the community I was trying to start, and I kept saying, "I'm not trying to start a community. I want to develop a facility."

Another thing we wanted was some place that was not busy, busy, busy. The festivals were a great place to meet people, but they weren't a great place to explore relationships or develop anything permanent. Everybody's running to workshops and to this place and that place. We wanted a place for communication and contemplation.

During one of their festival circuit trips, the cabin where Blanche and Amoja had been living when they were not on the road burned to the ground with all their possessions—books, clothing, craft supplies, everything. Women donated toward their recovery so generously that, as Blanche said, "We went right from disaster relief into fundraising for this land."

During the land search, they stayed for a while at WIT's End farm in Tennessee (see p. 106), house sitting. Then, while renting a house in Auto, West Virginia, from a gay boy who had built the house himself, they found the land they were looking for in Buckingham County, Virginia. In order to be closer to the new land, they moved into a place that was slightly renovated from an old juke joint. (The history of the juke joint is a story in itself.)

In the beginning of their work on Maat Dompim, Blanche says, Women were enthusiastic. They'd say, "If you get a place, I'm in!" A woman who had written about her experience on some women of color land in another state said, "If it's in Virginia it would be more convenient for me, but wherever

you do it, I'm there!" People would say, "When you get the nonprofit status, we will come." (We did that in 1992.) Then they said, "When you get the land, we will come." And we did (1998), and they did, and they oohed and ahed, volunteered to do things, and then went home and failed to follow through.



Photo by Lorraine Fontana, used with permission

Blanche Jackson at Womenwrites in Fall 2011.

Then Amoja got sick and had surgery. Right after she came home from the hospital, they were evicted from the juke joint, because the landlady's family members wanted to use it. Blanche had her hands full with caregiving and trying to make enough income to live on. She had thirty days to find another home and move all their belongings. One day, she came home to find Amoja gone and a note on the table. Amoja had gone back to her family

in Minnesota. Blanche put their things in storage and rented an old trailer from a fellow she refers to as the “scumlord.” She said it was like living in a cracked can:

All that threw me into ongoing permanent survival mode. I’ve been trying to figure out what to do with the land ever since. I tried to give it away. One of the problems is that the access road needs work. The land itself is beautiful. It has some of the most beautiful views. It’s 109 acres, and then there’s another 24 acres under a quit claim deed.

“I’ve tried to find other groups who would take it over,” Blanche says. The land is paid for, but back taxes are owed that she has been unable to squeeze out the money for. Although the nonprofit has lapsed (but could be reinstated), the not-for-profit (Maat Dompim) still exists and owns the land. Nobody is living there. Every so often, someone shows up who seems interested, and then they go back home again, and that’s the end of it. Blanche says,

I thought the women of color land would be like a great big women of color tent. We tried to write the core proposal for the land project like a honeycomb, so that it had a firm structure, but a lot of open spaces where women could plug anything in. . . .

You know, it’s funny. There’ll be all these positive omens and signs, and suddenly everything comes together! And then everything falls apart.

## WHY I’M NOT ON WOMEN’S LAND<sup>1</sup>

Juana Maria Paz

*This piece was originally published in Maize in 1984, when the author was in her early thirties. Since writing it, she spent seven years at Twin Oaks, a mixed gender, primarily heterosexual, intentional community in Virginia. Today, she lives with her daughter and grandson in Richmond, Virginia. Additions to the original piece are indicated by italics.*

After reading the second issue of *Maize*, I am struck with the fact that most women’s lands are sparsely populated. I learned recently that Cabbage Lane in Oregon is empty even though it’s paid for and has cabins. OWL Farm is in jeopardy, and a woman recently said to me, “Why don’t women live there?” To which I replied, “Are you going back?”

“No,” she said, “I can’t make a living there, but women with money could do it. With all those women on the west coast, I don’t know why they can’t find women who want to live there.”

“I know why,” I said, “because it’s too insecure. The land and cabins might be secure, but that’s all. Anyone who can afford to live somewhere else doesn’t want to take the risk, and the people who are insecure financially are not in a good position to try it.”

I think women’s lands have remained on the fringes of the women’s movement because mystery, controversy, and secrecy surround them. I wonder how many groups exist that don’t want publicity and why not. I wonder how many connections have been made between city and country women through *Lesbian Connection’s Land Directory*. *Publicity was a double-edged sword. How could we do outreach for support and not advertise our*

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in *Maize* 3 (1984): 8–10, when the author was living in Fayetteville, Arkansas.