

## **Always Becoming**

Nora Naranjo-Morse, K'apovi (Santa Clara Pueblo)

We are the children from the West.  
Tsan Piye.  
Pueblo.  
Pima.  
Dineh.

Desert Land  
And cedar scent.  
Sagebrush and sandstone.  
We are the mud builders  
Who make homes from spit and dirt.

Keep breathing  
You are becoming something new  
Embrace this beginning without fear

And so we have come to this place  
At the crossroads of asphalt and fertile ground.  
Where the Old Man Rock and Mud children  
Stand under the elm's expansive shelter  
Mixing earth and dreams.

Keep pressing and weaving the old woman says,  
It will keep your heart clear and strong.  
Keep breathing in Sweetgrass and Sage.  
Keep breathing.

*Always Becoming* (2007) is rooted in Pueblo culture—specifically that of the Tewa people of northern New Mexico. Tewa have a long history of using earthen materials in their clay work and mud homes.

The clay used in pottery is gathered from veins and deposits along the hillsides and mountains of the Southwest. Tewa people believe that each clay deposit and vein is a living entity and should be respected as such.

Traditionally Pueblo vessels were used in spiritual ceremonies as well as daily life. After a particular vessel had gone through its spiritual or utilitarian life or use, it was set outside so that it could return to the earth.

The Tewa worldview centers on a strong relationship between human and earth. The concept of *Always Becoming* began at a clay deposit tucked high in the mountains of

northern New Mexico. It is in the quiet of those mountains that the human-earth relationship is present—where the Pueblo worldview is sanctioned by nature.



**Fig. 1** Plastering Nora Naranjo-Morse’s *Always Becoming* (2007) with colored clay (left) and mud and clay (right) in 2015.

In 2007 *Always Becoming* was constructed on the grounds of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC.<sup>1</sup> From the outset, *Always Becoming* was unique. Its materials are dirt, straw, and wood. Our “construction crew” consisted of an Indigenous Mexican family and members of my own family, all of whom are skilled in mud work and building.

The ephemeral sculptures were built by people who embrace this human-earth relationship. Over the years, other people have become part of the stewardship and care of these living sculptures, reminding us of different cultural perspectives and connections to the environment.



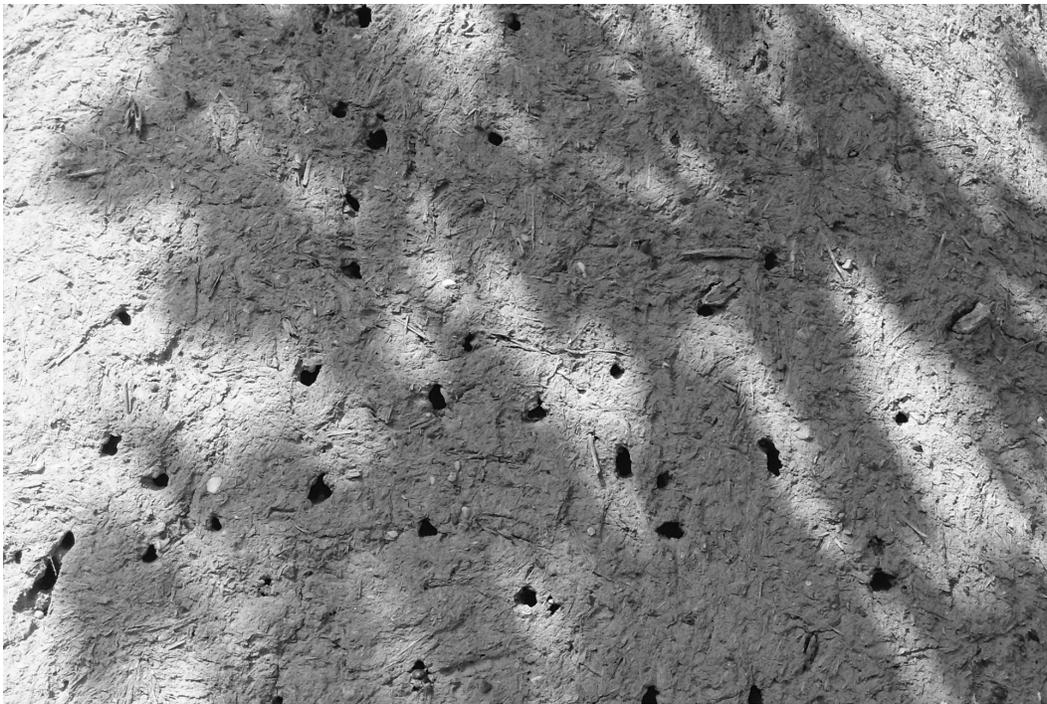
**Fig. 2** The author with staff and volunteers from the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, plastering *Always Becoming* in 2015.



**Fig. 3** A security guard from the National Museum of the American Indian plastering *Always Becoming* in 2015.



**Fig. 4** “Gia” (Tewa for “mother”), one of the figures in *Always Becoming*, in 2015.



**Fig. 5** Mason bees in Gia in 2015.



**Fig. 6** *Always Becoming* at the National Museum of the American Indian in 2015.

*Always Becoming* celebrates the continuum of life, the changing seasons and cycles of the cosmos. Like the Pueblo vessels placed outdoors, *Always Becoming* will return to the earth. But in the meantime, the earthen forms are evolving into a sanctuary for mason bees that burrow into the forgiving mud surfaces and provide structural support for elements like bird's nests. The concept of a living sculpture that welcomes wildlife and dissolves all at the same time challenges most Western concepts of art, especially in a city where many sculptural forms are meant to be permanent.

Despite the effects of colonization, Native people continue to offer unique perspectives that are inspired by ancestral ways of being. Because of this, conservation or stewardship of *Always Becoming* is seen through an Indigenous lens.<sup>2</sup> With the help of the National Museum of the American Indian and the institution's staff we are continually discovering creative ways to engage with the physical pieces and wildlife inhabitants as well as the layered cultural and environmental concepts that are foundational to *Always Becoming*.

<sup>1</sup> *Always Becoming*, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, [https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI\\_282067](https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI_282067).

<sup>2</sup> “Always Becoming Sculpture Project,” National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, September 20, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLEAF79944F6B13C8D>.