



## *Border Arts: Preserving and Celebrating Intangible Dance Heritage in Contested Borderscapes*

- UNESCO (2022) defines intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as “the practices, knowledge, and expressions that communities recognise as part of their cultural **identity**”.
- Understanding a community’s ICH can positively impact **intercultural dialogue** and promote **mutual respect**.
- International borderscapes are politically and culturally contested. **Migration has transformed identities and places**. The relationship between ICH and borderscapes is deeply entwined.
- At the US-Mexico border, migrations have driven security initiatives and anti-immigration policies. Nationalist discourse proclaiming the ‘erosion’ of American values are rife. This is detrimental to ICH, which does not conform to geopolitical boundaries.
- **Dance heritage** plays a vital role in the cultural vitality of the borderscape and facilitates conversation about sensitive subjects like migration and border-building, which is an important step toward lessening hostility.
- When properly integrated, dance heritage can contribute to more **inclusive societies**. Dance can foster belonging, support community connections, and drive economic growth

This research examines **how Hispanic dance**, including choreographed dance works, codified techniques, and traditional danced stories, **provide social-cultural benefits** to borderland communities and cities, and are important tools in facilitating inclusive border discourse. To realise their potential, **the benefits of dance as ICH must be better understood and integrated into policy**. This will depend on cultural and geographical sensitivity, cross-boundary approaches, sustained support for creative organisations, stakeholder engagement, and multi-sensual review and documentation processes.

### Policy Recommendations

- **Explore methods and techniques** to document borderscape ICH, trialling Hispanic dance as case study.
- **Develop partnerships** with creative organisations to better understand challenges and opportunities of border ICH.
- **Ensure support** - financial, infrastructural, and professional - capable of maximising the benefits of ICH initiatives and programmes.
- **Enhance transmission** of ICH cross-culturally and cross-generationally via a suite of activities and events, ensuring artistic collaboration throughout.
- **Identify opportunities** to embed dance ICH into municipal tourism plans, capitalising on the ‘Border Arts Cities’ concept.

Cultural dance can contribute to United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (3, 11 and 16) and the International Organisation for Migration’s mission to “deliver on the promise of migration.”



## Dance Heritage for Societal Wellbeing in Border Cities

- Dances are passed down inter-corporeally via demonstration, practice and corrections. When communities or cultural practices change, these can be lost if there are no **active efforts to preserve them**.
- Although dance can be written, it is prone to disappearing because it is inherently **ephemeral**.
- Research results from El Paso show that cross-border artists and residencies have provided otherwise inaccessible access to embodied knowledges and opportunities to perform. Both are effective in **translating disappearing heritage**.
- Dance work (e.g. Majísimo, Huapango) and codified techniques (e.g. Ballet Folklórico, Vaganova) are vital **expressions of Hispanic/Latino cultural heritage**. The style, rhythm, steps, and costumes are deeply rooted in cultures, identities and geographies. For migrant communities, they offer connections to home.
- Hispanic dance works and techniques have created a unique 'brand' for El Paso Ballet Theatre, positioning it as a **hub of expertise** and, through public showcases, of performance excellence. It has supported long-term ICH preservation and cross-cultural dialogue.
- **Good planning and integration are essential** to maximise the benefits of dance and other ICH. It should prioritise sensitive, sustained, and collaborative approaches with cultural organisations and artists.
- **Multi-sensual documentation** is essential to preserve works and measure outcomes.
- Border cities can capitalise on their rich cultures and heritages, positioning them as global '**Border Art Cities**', boosting economic growth while concurrently preserving ICH.



## The Future

- The USA has declared a '**border crisis**' and deployed a raft of laws and policing tactics to 'stop' the flow and deport 'illegals'.
- There is pressing need for **humanitarian approaches to migrations and new conceptualisations of borderscapes**, that are more tolerant and foreground the social, cultural, and economic benefits.
- Rather than spaces of fixity, borders are fluid. **Bilateral flows** of people, goods, and ideas have irreversibly **transformed the cultures and geographies** of the border.
- Borderscapes harbour unique cultural heritage and artistic diversity. However, efforts to preserve and celebrate **ICH remain subsidiary to** tangible heritage.
- ICH is **vulnerable to geopolitical and geoeconomic forces**, whether National policies, UNESCO priorities, or political will for cross-national collaborations.
- **Careful cultural planning is required** to bring ICH to new audiences, ensuring its preservation. It is required to support training in 'at risk' dances and codified techniques.
- Dance is inherently political but engages the political in creative ways. This can facilitate **conversation on sensitive subjects** related to US-Mexico border policies, migrations and multiculturalism.
- Border cities are uniquely positioned to capitalise on their cultural assets, as 'capitals' of a distinct Border Art, leveraging ICH for **economic and cultural outcomes**.

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More information, including other cultural dance works, can be found here: [www.elpasoballettheatre.com/](http://www.elpasoballettheatre.com/)

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