While members of both the Bolivian Workshop of Popular Music, “Arawi” and Música de Maestros made references to indigenous cultures in their music performances, they were for the most part members of the mestizo-Creole culture of La Paz. The two musical projects followed a long historical pattern in which some Bolivians have represented other Bolivians—that is, Bolivia’s mestizo-Creoles have represented Bolivia’s indigenous peoples. These kinds of representational projects can be interpreted under the rubric of indigenismo, a political and cultural current found in many Latin American contexts in which mestizo-Creoles have used references to indigenous cultures to bolster a national or regional identity. But Bolivia has had its own flavor of indigenismo, marked by the Chaco War, the 1952 Revolution, and indigenous mobilizations particular to Bolivia. Through a closer examination of the cultural projects of the workshop and Música de Maestros, I will argue that particular changes in performance practices in the representation of the indigenous mark a shift from the early-twentieth-century politics of indigenismo to the more recent politics of what might be labeled as “the return of the Indian,” to borrow the title phrase from an article by Xavier Albó (1991). By “return of the Indian” I refer to a resurgence of indigenous politics that has in turn shaped the ways elites, mestizos, and the state represent indigenous cultures within the national community.

Both indigenismo and “the return of the Indian” go to the heart of what is implied by the terms “politics of culture” and “cultural politics” (Williams 1991; Jordan and Weedon 1995; Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar
1998: 2–7). As Brett Williams succinctly put it, the politics of culture emerge when “some people have more power than others to shape who gets to say what” (1991: 3). In this chapter, I examine the politics of culture through a discussion of both aesthetics and authenticity: How do some people have more power to shape who gets to hear what; who defines the parameters of cultural-historical authenticity; and what then can enter a symbolic economy as alienable property? Both national music projects relate in distinct ways to what I have called cultural-historical authenticity and to unique authenticity, the latter referring to the new, the innovative, and that which is thought to emerge from the depths of individual creative genius. In this chapter these kinds of authenticities are revealed in their connections to particularist and universalist aesthetics. Even though in a French folklore festival Música de Maestros represented the particularist position of “Bolivian folklore,” in Bolivia both this ensemble and the workshop strove for equal footing with the universalist positions of “Great music” and “Great composers.” In this sense, Música de Maestros followed a cosmopolitan ideology whereby each nation is assumed to have its great composers who simply need to be recognized, recorded, and raised to the level of their European counterparts (see Turino 2000: 105–108). This chapter is about the balancing act of claiming cultural-historical authenticities—particularities about Bolivia, often metonymically represented through references to indigenous cultures—while also embracing the universalizing tendencies behind the ethos of the unique authenticity of artistic creation. Both of these musical projects make particularist and universalist claims in ways that are neither oppositional nor mutually exclusive. The classification of composers as “universal” or “particularist” is not foreign to Western classical music traditions (see Leyshon, Matless, and Revill 1998: 9), but a universalist claim has a distinct importance when it is made by composers in a country where social relations have been historically structured in subordination to the West.

In light of these two examples, it seems appropriate to return to David Whisnant’s original discussion of the “politics of culture” in All That is Native and Fine (1983). Whisnant studied settlement schools in the southern Appalachian Mountains and their projects of cultural preservation and survival. Under the rubric of the “politics of culture,” Whisnant emphasized both “systematic cultural intervention” and the function of fixating on a romanticized view of a culture that exists within a broader sociopolitical context (1983: 13). While neither the workshop nor Música de Maestros demonstrated any great affinity for the term “folklore,” some of the differences between these two projects can be illuminated through what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett called the mistaken dichotomy be-