On May 28, 1998, twenty years after the Panzós massacre, I had the privilege of accompanying the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation to return the boxed skeletal remains of the victims to their villages, mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, and grandchildren. This concluded the exhumation we began in September of 1997 for the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission to document the 1978 Guatemalan army massacre of Q'eqch'i Maya peasants in the plaza of Panzós.

As we entered Panzós, winding around the bend that passes the cemetery, there was chanting, applause, and the honking of a hand-held horn. We were stopped in the middle of the road, surrounded by a cheering crowd. More than 400 people were walking by the cemetery near the entrance to Panzós. Before we could take the boxes to the municipal center to place them in coffins, the community wanted us to unload the cardboard boxes at the cemetery. Everyone wanted to help unload the trucks. The widows were laughing, smiling, and crying; they embraced us. They kissed us. Each woman wanted to carry a box. The elder women performed a Mayan ritual until the sky opened in a heavy downpour.

In the rain, we all sat on the half mile down the road to the church. The women sat with the boxes on their heads. When we reached the church, the women placed the 36 boxes at the altar. It did not seem to matter that the speakers were almost completely blocked out of sight by the boxes. Everyone was weeping; the rain fell on the men's hair. Most everyone was smiling—everyone with tears running down their faces. There was a collective sense of victory. These monolingual Q'eqch'i women had successfully stood up to those who threatened them, to those who killed their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers.

Several hours later, following surdaures, testimonials and a Catholic mass, the widows again insisted on carrying the boxes from the church to the municipal center. This procession was more than symbolic. The widows were carrying the remains of the victims across the plaza where the massacre had taken place. It was in this plaza 20 years earlier that several hundred Q'eqch'i peasants had gathered to protest the loss of their lands only to be greeted by machine-gun fire from the army. Like the exhumation, each sap of the reburf ritual is at once a memorial to the victims and an act of empowerment for survivors.

Inside the center, the remains were transferred from boxes to small wooden coffins. The artifacts (clothing, shoes, personal items) were placed on top of the coffins to allow survivors an opportunity to identify a lost loved one. Though not somber, these identifications are important to survivors because of the wish to carry the coffin of their loved one. The coffins were marked for burial the following day. As all of this was done, the widows performed a ritual to the deceased.

At six the next morning, some 1,505 people gathered outside Panzós at the site where the land protest had begun on May 29, 1978. Carrying the coffins holding banners in memory
of the victims and proclaiming the rights of the Mayas, the burial procession began at 10 a.m. For the next few hours, we slowly walked toward the center of Panzós in the harsh sun.

The participation of Mayan beauty queens in the procession followed a community tradition of beauty queens speaking up for justice. On June 15, 1979, when Amalia Erandiina Coy Pop was crowned Indigenous Queen of nearby San Cristóbal, she denounced the Panzos massacre, which had occurred just two weeks earlier. Her statements were met with impact and retribution. A group of local ladinos argued that she did not give her speech in Spanish and hurled stones that she had spoken about the Panzos massacre, presaging the mayor of San Cristóbal and the fair’s beauty pageant committee to remove her title and crown.

When the burial procession reached Panzos, participants again filled the plaza where the massacre had taken place. For the next several hours in the evening heat, survivors gave testimonies, prayers were said, and calls for justice were made. Everyone was invited to speak.

By early afternoon, the procession slowly moved out of the plaza, down the street, and up the hill to the cemetery. After the horses were led, the coffins were passed into the grave. Throughout the burial, signs denouncing repression were held and widows called for justice.

Throughout the burial, widows also continued their prayers for the husbands and sons they lost in the massacre two decades earlier.

The widows and survivors of the Panzos massacre organized their community to request an exhumation and ultimately succeeded not only in the exhumation, but also in the retaking of public spaces: the municipal plaza, the church, and the cemetery. As a community, winners challenged these public spaces as mere reminders of a people’s loss and remade them into sites of popular memory containing official stories. Further, these same survivors and widows secured the space they had created not only to publicly claim collective memory, but also to move forward with legal proceedings against the masterminds and perpetrators of the massacre.