Where do things go when they are lost, discarded, or forgotten? What social afterlives do they lead? And perhaps more importantly, whose lives are constituted among the detritus? I sketch out new directions for an anthropology of value, one that looks beyond the horizons of capital towards the futures that lie in its ruins. To that end, I ask what might constitute an abject economy—an economy built precisely on the abjection and abandonment of people, places, and things. What emergent forms of life endure, for example, in the interstices of capital? What non-market practices and regimes of value are possible within its folds? I develop both a theoretical framework for future research, and an ethnographic description from my own work with dumpster-divers, squatters, and other scavengers in several “global” cities in North America. These scavengers cultivate minor economies, putting into circulation those surpluses—people, places, and things alike—discarded by the prevailing markets and publics of these cities. They present us with one model of an abject economy: non-market forms of surplus value and labor, simultaneously made possible and necessary by the vicissitudes of capital accumulation. Such economies hold profound lessons for the anthropology of the twenty-first century. In a moment when there seems to be no “outside” to capitalism, we may yet discover its margins, and there may we not only learn a great deal about the ontological grounds of capital itself, but also discover existing and emergent modes of valuing otherwise.

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