The lecture explores what the petroleum industry calls “first oil” to shed light on the uneven process of resource making on the margins of global zones of extraction. In particular, I examine how the double obscurity of hydrocarbon prospects – both geologically obscured and their worth not yet revealed by the market – generates particular material constraints and setbacks that are characteristic of petroleum production. My analysis draws on ethnographic and archival material from São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) where repeated attempts to explore offshore oil have yet to transform geological potential into an economic asset. I highlight the incongruous effects of certain epistemic practices and devices (contract, zone and well) aimed at managing uncertainty in the exploration process. Instead of realising petroleum potential, they work as gestures of an indeterminate matter whose existence has continued to be doubted.

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