Student 1

2/27/20

I went to a locksport/lockpicking workshop at the Maker Space, because when I stopped by his office yesterday, Scott had told me he would be leading one and suggested I go. I got there around 5:40 to set up before the event started at 6 and sat down in the Classroom as Scott and [STUDENT NAME] (a CS major at Amherst) set up locks and people filed in. The workshop would go like this, Shira announced to the room, pointing grandly at each room as she mentioned it: Scott would give a presentation in the Classroom, then everyone would go into the Workshop and the next flood of people would enter the Classroom. In the Workshop, there were locks and tools on each table; you could play with them until you unlocked all of them or got bored.

Scott began the presentation, and I paid close attention to the words he used to describe the parts of a lock. Locks have flaws, we can leverage those flaws; locks are designed to make picking them harder. The pins in the locks, the little cylinders on springs that keys push up to the correct height to let the barrel turn, are dynamic—they are springy when they’re not the binding pin, tight when they are. You feel friction when you’re pushing on the binding pin—it pushes back on you. You exert tension on the tension wrench you put in the barrel, the tension wrench exerts tension on the barrel, and the barrel pushes back until all the pins are lined up, and then it slides free and the lock opens. Picking locks is a form of attack. Different keys have different access, power. The very act of carrying a lock pick means if you get busted for a crime––say, trespassing––your crime is automatically worse, as the presence of the lockpick implies intention. It carries weight, despite not weighing much.

Watching people as they picked up locks and turned them over in their hands as we waited for the picks and tension wrenches to be distributed by Maker Space student staff, I picked one up myself and wondered *why* so many people were there to learn to pick locks. Scott had emphasized at the very beginning that you should never pick a lock that you do not have permission to pick—but wasn’t that the draw of it, the potential to enter spaces officially hidden from you? Locks denote boundaries. Keys denote power. People learn to pick locks to their exert agency over locks—because locks, by merely performing their intended function, exert power over us.

I listened in to conversations around me as we began to pick. The two student staff standing near my table played with some locks, joking that you have to “ask the lock for permission to open it.” I found this to be true. A light, gentle touch with the tension wrench, a cautious curiosity as you poke the pick in; if you push too hard, if you jam the pick in, the lock will not open itself to you. When you get the binding pin into the right position, you feel the lock agreeing with you, turning its barrel a little more, letting you find the next binding pin and continue on. It’s a give and take, and if you push a pin too far, the lock will tell you, and you have to release the tension and start again.

When people opened the locks, they exclaimed. One male student looked up from his lock and shouted, “Ahhahah! That is a satisfying feeling,” grinning as he leaned back in his seat and looked around the room. The older woman sitting at my table closed her eyes, focusing intensely on using her other senses to guide the lock open. Frustration creeps over you slowly if the lock will not reveal itself, often resulting in you putting down the lock noisily, sighing or asking why it won’t open. Not, “why can’t I open this?” but “Why won’t this open?” We recognize the lock’s agency, its power over us. We hold the thin metal picks until our fingers are sore, press down with our left ring and pinkie fingers on the tension wrench as our hands cramp up—and until the lock opens or our frustration is too great, we persist.