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# From the Bachelor's Delight to Violent Ends: Labor and Freedom in Lisa Joy's Westworld

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## Abstract

The harrowing "shaving-time" scene of Melville's riveting 1855 novella, "Benito Cereno," is, like the rest of the story, told from the point of view of Amasa Delano, commander of a large vessel harbored off the coast of Chile. Heading out in a whaleboat to offer assistance to a meandering, flagless ship, neither the "singularly undistrustful" Delano nor the reader yet realizes that nearly all the ship's Spanish officers have been killed in a slave uprising, save Captain Benito Cereno. Delano (and reader) thus remain unaware that the remaining seamen and Cereno are simply performing the roles that they possessed prior to the rebellion, at the direction of Cereno's former body servant, Babo. In the pivotal scene, which did not appear in Delano's original 1817 narrative on which Melville based his story, Babo shaves Cereno. Delano prattles on cluelessly about Babo's "peculiar" suitability to the task, even as Melville's methodical description of the freshly stropped blade scraping slowly over Cereno's upturned throat intensifies the story's foreboding mood. Elaborate explanation of "the mode of shaving" favored by Spaniards in the Americas and Babo's skill with the razor both reveal the layers of everyday, intimate violence to which enslaved "valets and hairdressers" were subject: a lifetime of forced bodily labor. The recycling and repurposing of the "shaving scene" as the opening vignette of the revelatory season one finale of the 2016 HBO drama, *Westworld*, highlights the broader resonances between Melville's nuanced critique of racial slavery and showrunner Lisa Joy's exploration of the brutality to which *Westworld*'s android "hosts" are daily subject-hosts who were designed to enable wealthy tourists to live out their most violent fantasies. Based in part of a book-length study of the politics of hair removal, this paper emphasizes the specific potency of Joy's decision to open her explosive finale with a shaving scene redolent of complex themes of vulnerability, exploitation, and racialized, sexualized labor.

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