HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

A Fork in the "Rhodes"

By Kate Daversa

Published July 2022, revised August 2026 | www.legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/case-studies and www.justiceinschools.org

Learning about a topic like the legacy of slavery can be overwhelming. Community Care Resources are available for members of the Harvard community seeking support for mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

BACKGROUND

In this fictional case study, Layla, a Black Harvard College student with South African and Zimbabwean ancestry, grapples with whether to apply for the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship, knowing that its creator and primary funder spread white supremacy and imperialism across the African continent.[1] Should Cecil Rhodes's historical legacy[2] impact her decision—and if so, in what direction?

It was a sunny day in early April at Harvard, one of those first warm days that suggest spring is well on its way in Cambridge, and Layla was afraid she was going to be late. Although she wished she could slow down and sit on one of the benches sprinkled throughout the Quad to

[1] The Rhodes Trust website includes a biography by Robert Calderisi of Cecil Rhodes, highlighting his achievements. See the excerpt here: https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/media2/3h4p3rzz/the-life-and-legacy-of-cecil-rhodes.pdf. For more general information about the Rhodes Scholarship today, explore the Rhodes Trust website: https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/scholarships/the-rhodes-scholarship/. For another historian's perspective on Cecil Rhodes and the Rhodes scholarship program, see: Ziegler, P. (2008). Legacy: Cecil Rhodes, the Rhodes Trust and Rhodes scholarships. Yale University Press.

[2] "Why is Cecil Rhodes Such a Controversial Figure?," from the BBC, explores the critiques of Rhodes and his legacy that inform much of Layla's thinking in the case. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32131829. The Rhodes Trust acknowledges the debates about the significance of Cecil Rhodes's life and legacy. See a condensed version of the history of this debate: https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/impact-legacy/legacy-equity-inclusion/life-and-legacy-debates-about-cecil-rhodes/.

enjoy the weather, she hurried on, nearly tripping over one of the many uneven bricks in the walkway as she went. Layla's advisor, Eileen Richardson, had asked her to stop by her office before class; the professor said that the reason for the meeting was "top secret, but all good things, I promise," which made Layla even more anxious to get to the Science Center.

When Layla walked into Professor Richardson's sunlit corner office, she was surprised to see one of her classmates, Archer, already occupying her favorite seat by the window and laughing at something Richardson had just said.

Ugh, I thought this was going to be one-on-one, she thought. What is Archer doing here? And why is the reason for this meeting so hush-hush? It's too early in the morning for this level of mystery.

"Layla, so good to see you," Professor Richardson said brightly as Layla made herself comfortable in the other chair. "I'm sorry to call you both here on such short notice and under such ambiguous circumstances. But I just had to be the first one to give you the good news." She paused for dramatic effect, and Layla and Archer looked puzzledly at each other.

"I'm recommending you both to the College for endorsement for the Rhodes Scholarship!" she grinned widely and looked expectantly at the students in front of her. Archer gasped audibly and tried to hide the excitement on his face, but Layla felt… excited, sure, but also shocked, apprehensive, and uncomfortable. She could feel her face getting hot as Archer thanked Professor Richardson profusely.

"Is everything alright, Layla?" Professor Richardson asked, a wrinkle creasing her brow. "I thought you would be thrilled to hear about this opportunity."

"Oh no, I'm… ah… no, I'm happy," Layla replied faintly. "It's just—it's the RHODES Scholarship. Created by Cecil Rhodes. Also known as the former prime minister of the Cape Colony and 'grandfather' of apartheid."[3]

Thanks to her extensive coursework for her minor in African studies, Layla was all too familiar with the harm Cecil Rhodes caused. Having great-grandparents and grandparents who emigrated from South Africa and Zimbabwe made the history personal for Layla.

[3] As the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony (which later became South Africa), Rhodes introduced and passed legislation that began the segregation of native Africans from the rest of the community, paving the way for Apartheid. See the Glen Grey Act of 1884. Source: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cecil-Rhodes/Policies-as-prime-minister-of-Cape-Colony. Describing Cecil Rhodes as the "grandfather of apartheid" has become relatively common. See https://vancouver.citynews.ca/2019/06/24/vancouver-cecil-rhodes-sign/ and https://www.news24.com/citypress/voices/the-land-issue-paul-kruger-in-perspective-20160617.

"So?" interjected Archer. "Seems like he contributed something great to the world by putting so much money into a scholarship fund."

Layla sighed. "Well, it's not as simple as that. Rhodes did create an incredible program with the Rhodes Scholarship, but the majority of his fortune came from diamond mines in Africa, where white British capitalists and imperialists like himself exploited native African workers and made money off their labor.[4] And he thought those workers who made him his money were 'the most despicable specimens of human beings,' according to one of his most famous writings, and was intent on bringing them and the entire continent of Africa under British rule."[5]

Professor Richardson raised her eyebrows. "A scientist and a historian? Why am I not surprised, Layla?"

"Isn't that just what this is, history?" Archer cut in. "I mean, it happened at least a hundred years ago. Rhodes's money is being used for good now, so shouldn't we just go forward with our applications and be glad that we have the opportunity?"

"Yes, the opportunity to do something positive," agreed Professor Richardson. "You are both incredibly gifted, and with the resources and connections you would have access to at Oxford, you have the potential to make significant contributions to the scientific community and the world."

Before Layla could get another word in edgewise, the meeting wrapped up, and she found herself heading back out into the Yard. Did that really just happen? She thought dazedly. I get what Professor Richardson was saying about making a big contribution to the world, but do I have to have Rhodes's blood money in my back pocket in order to do it?[6]

"Oh come on, not again," Layla muttered. She picked up shards of the broken vial off the floor and threw them in the trash. She had been trying to mix and pipette the same solution for the last hour, but she kept getting the steps of the protocol wrong and dropping things.

Kris, another chemistry concentrator interning in the lab, looked over from their bench. "Layla, need a hand over there?"

Layla sighed. "You know I hate asking for help, Kris, but this time, I think I need it."

[4] Source: https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa/Diamonds-gold-and-imperialist-intervention-1870-1902

[5] Source: George Walker (2016) 'So Much to Do': Oxford and the Wills of Cecil Rhodes, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 44:4, 697-716, DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2016.1211295. Page 703.

[6] "Blood money" is money gained from a source that harms others or from a seedy source. See the Oxford English Dictionary, online: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/blood-money_n?tab=meaning_and_use#17845110.

Kris cleared their throat as they started filling the remaining unbroken vials with the solution Layla had created. “Layla, I can tell something’s on your mind. You’re usually way more careful when you’re working at the bench. Anything you want to talk about?”

Layla smiled. “You know me too well. Have you heard of the Rhodes Scholarship?”

“For sure!” Kris replied. “That’s the super famous one for going to Oxford, right?”

“Yeah, exactly. Professor Richardson recommended me as a candidate and wants the College to endorse my application. But I don’t know how I feel about applying when I know that it’s funded primarily by money from Cecil Rhodes’s fortune.”

Kris let out a low whistle. “Yikes. I can see why you’re struggling with that one. Rhodes kind of goes against everything you believe in, doesn’t he?”

“Right. Like how can I claim to stay true to my ancestry if I take his money—particularly if I then flaunt his name like a gold star on my CV? That just seems morally repulsive. But if folks like me don’t apply, then the cohorts of scholars going forward will remain as white and male-dominated as it has traditionally been, and that’s awful too.”[7]

Both students were quiet for a moment, pondering Layla’s dilemma as they filled more vials and marked them with the date and time.

Kris spoke up again as they finished their work and discarded their gloves. “Maybe you can do some good if you apply for the scholarship and are selected. You could be vocal about the truth of Rhodes’s legacy and demand that the Rhodes Scholarship administrators work harder to make up for the terrible impact he had. Encourage change from the inside, you know?”

Right then, Adam, a new doctoral student in the lab, poked his head around the corner. “Oh hey, Adam!” Layla exclaimed. “I didn’t know you were going to be in today.”

“Yes, I came in last minute to check on some cell cultures I started yesterday. Did I hear you both talking about the Rhodes Scholarship?”

[7] Women were not admitted to the Rhodes program until a 1977 act of the British Parliament overturned a clause in Cecil Rhodes’s will that stipulated that only men could be accepted. Despite African American Alain Locke showing promise after being admitted to the fourth Rhodes class in 1907, the Rhodes trust has admitted that “entrenched racism within and beyond the Rhodes community” caused only a handful of the qualified Black scholars to be admitted to the program throughout much of the twentieth century. However, despite the history of white men being disproportionately admitted to the program, women and people of color have made important gains in recent years. See https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/impact-legacy/legacy-equity-inclusion/race-and-the-rhodes-scholarship/; https://jbhe.com/2020/12/ten-african-americans-are-among-this-years-32-rhodes-scholars-from-the-united-states/; https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/diversity-marks-latest-class-us-rhodes-scholars-n1092261.

"Yes, Layla's being nominated by Professor Richardson," Kris explained.

"Congratulations, Layla! Kris, I think you mentioned trying to make change from within the Rhodes Scholars community, right? It sounds great in theory, but I was a Rhodes Scholar before I came to the University, and trust me, making change from the inside is much harder in practice than I expected."

"Ugh," Layla responded involuntarily. "Why?"

"I was finishing my degree at Oxford around the same time as the second Rhodes Must Fall campaign[8] was picking up speed there, in 2020," said Adam. "Many of the scholars wanted to engage with the movement and tried to enact a lot of changes within the Rhodes House itself, but we didn't get nearly as much traction as we wanted. Only a few of our demands were met, and many of those were scholar-led and required a lot of labor on our part, like incorporating workshops on Rhodes's legacy into Welcome Week for new scholars.[9] In my opinion, the changes happened too slowly, and not enough responsibility was taken on by the Rhodes House administration. I think they've even walked the work back since I was there; I went on their site the other day to reread the statements they made about the Black Lives Matter movement and couldn't find the page anymore.[10] I just don't want anyone else to go into a Rhodes Scholarship as naively as I did and end up facing similar disappointment."

"I don't know, Adam," Kris interjected. "A workshop series to help scholars gain the knowledge they need to engage thoughtfully with the Rhodes legacy sounds like a pretty big step in the right direction."

"Yeah, we made some kind of difference," Adam acknowledged. "And the Rhodes Trust is now requiring training for all of their Rhodes selectors to ensure their judgment is

[8] Oxford students, inspired by the movement at the University of Cape Town to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes from campus, began a similar movement to have a statue of Rhodes removed from one of the buildings at Oriel College. For both campaigns, the Rhodes statues represented the harm done to students of color by deeply entrenched racism. See https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/16/the-real-meaning-of-rhodes-must-fall and https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/10/world/europe/cecil-rhodes-statue-oxford.html for more information.

[9] The Rhodes website details the work that has been done since the Rhodes Trust launched their Legacy, Action, and Inclusion (LEI) Plan in 2021: https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/impact-legacy/legacy-equity-inclusion/the-trust-s-legacy-equity-and-inclusion-work/ However, some argue that new programming doesn't go far enough, as student Ti-Jean Martin does in Oxford's student newspaper *Cherwell*: https://cherwell.org/2025/11/19/oriels-rhodes-exhibition-is-not-enough/.

[10] In June 2020, the Rhodes website included a page titled "#BlackLivesMatter, Racism, and Legacy," "acknowledg [ing] that racism continues to shape the unequal power structures and deep social and economic inequities of today's world." The original 2022 version of this case study included quotations from that page. It has since been taken down but can be viewed through the Internet Archive: https://web.archive.org/web/20230320061450/https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/impact-legacy/blacklivesmatter-racism-and-legacy/.

unclouded when they review applications.[11] So it's not like there's been no change, and I get that it's slow. But if Layla's going to apply—and win!—she needs to go in with her eyes wide open. It's a lot of emotional labor—it takes a toll—and success isn't guaranteed."

Layla made a mental note to do some research later that night as Adam went back to his bench and she and Kris returned to the experiment at hand.

After dinner, Layla got a call from her mom, Eleanor.

"Mom, I can't tell you what good timing this is. You've heard of the Rhodes Scholarship, right?"

"Yes, I have. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I got nominated—" Layla was cut off by a loud screech from the other end.

"Oh, congratulations, honey! This is huge!" Eleanor squealed.

"Mom, I haven't won a scholarship yet! A professor just recommended me to the College as a potential applicant, that's all."

"Of course they did! You're a stellar student, and the vice president of the Undergraduate Council and a published researcher, to boot!" Eleanor clapped her hands. "You've worked so hard and deserve this honor so much!"

Layla could feel her face getting hot and anxiously shifted the phone to her other ear. "Yeah, but mom, it's CECIL RHODES's Scholarship. He did so many terrible things and was basically the reason Gram and Gramps had to leave Africa.[12] How can I submit an application or accept the scholarship knowing that it represents everything we are against as a family?"

11 https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/media2/g2va2a3l/2029-rhodes-scholar-2022-7wsi.pdf#:~:text=Colleagues%20have%20made%20strong%20progress%20rolling%20out%20unconscious%20bias%20training%20for%20Selectors&text=million%20award%2C%20and%20previously%20for%20the%20Rhodes%20Scholarship

"Sweetheart, I hear what you're saying, but you should be a beneficiary of the Rhodes Scholarship precisely BECAUSE of your heritage—the Rhodes Trust owes this to you and our ancestors."

"But isn't that like trying to give someone money to get them to be quiet?" Layla asked. "I don't want to become complacent just because the Rhodes Trust is paying for my education."

Elanor laughed. "Knowing you, there's nothing anyone could do to get you to be quiet about a topic you care about! But your grandparents emigrated here and your father and I worked hard so that you could have precisely these kinds of opportunities in life. You are achieving our wildest dreams. Please don't let a little history get ino the way of that. Oops, the oven is beeping keeping—gotta go. I love you, honey!"

With a sigh, Layla flopped on her bed and started scrolling through her phone to distract herself from the swirling thoughts inside her head. Eventually, she made her way to the Rhodes Scholarship website.

Layla quickly found a whole section of the site dedicated to discussing Rhodes's legacy and how the Rhodes Trust and Rhodes Scholars were engaging with it. She learned that in 2021, the Rhodes Trust had launched a Legacy, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan, which had already led to multiple changes, including several advisory groups, robust discussion forums and events on Cecil Rhodes' life and legacy, and an "outreach ambassador scheme to encourage a more diverse pool of applicants for the Scholarships around the world."[13] The plan had also led to a new inscription on Rhodes House, written in the South African language Ixam, translating to "Remembering and honouring in our work those who suffered and laboured to generate this wealth."[14] Still, Layla couldn't help but wish that the Trust had gone further in taking action to support those communities harmed by Rhodes and his legacy.

Poking around online to see how past Black Rhodes recipients had decided to accept the scholarship, Layla found a member of the Class of 2020 whose words resonated with her deeply:

[12] For more on how Cecil Rhodes influenced racial segregation in South Africa and migration patterns in Zimbabwe, see: https://www.oriel.ox.ac.uk/cecil-rhodes-racial-segregation-in-the-cape-colony-and-violence-in-zimbabwe/. For more on migration patterns in South Africa from 1950-2000, see: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3733259/.

[13] https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/impact-legacy/legacy-equity-inclusion/the-trust-s-legacy-equity-and-inclusion-work/.

[14] https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/impact-legacy/legacy-equity-inclusion/a-new-inscription-for-rhodes-house/

"It is important for me to affirm openly, as many other Rhodes Scholars have also done, that this scholarship does not buy my silence. On the contrary, it was paid for in my ancestors' blood. I pledge to continue to honor them, God, my community and those who have supported me in making use of whatever tools and benefits may come from it… All I can ask is that I be judged not by what opportunities I am given, but how I use them instead."[15]

Layla let the last line sink in. "All I can ask is that I be judged not by what opportunities I am given, but how I use them instead."

Right then, Layla heard a knock at the door.

"Come in," she said, and Ayanna, her housemate and friend, bounded inside.

"Hey, Ayanna, Richardson is recommending that I be endorsed by the College for the Rhodes Scholarship."

"Wait, for real?" Ayanna stopped short, and a serious look crossed her face. "What are you going to do?" Like Layla, Ayanna was studying African studies, and she was just as aware of the terrible things Rhodes had done during his lifetime.

"I don't know. Honestly, I'm excited. It's really validating to know that Professor Richardson thinks this highly of me and my accomplishments. But… it's the RHODES Scholarship." Layla grimaced.

"So you see why I'm stuck. I want to apply, but it just feels… weird, knowing what he did to our ancestors and to so many other people. But, it would be the highlight of my academic career."

"So many other people? You mean hundreds of thousands of other people?" Ayanna said as she plopped down on Layla's bed. "Girl, this is not a hard decision. Cecil Rhodes was a racist, imperialist, and white supremacist. He made his fortune because our great-grandparents broke their backs working in his diamond mines. That scholarship is blood money!"

"Whoa, okay, I hear you, Ayanna. I'm just as angry as you are that Rhodes did such terrible things. But does that mean I shouldn't try for the scholarship? In some ways, maybe it's getting the better of Rhodes if his lifelong earnings go toward the education of young scholars of color. Would you turn it down if you were me?" Layla questioned.

---

[15] Perinchief, R.R. (17 January 2020). Right or not? Pondering the Rhodes well traveled. *The Royal Gazette*. https://www.royalgazette.com/other/article/20200117/right-or-not-pondering-the-rhodes-well-travelled/. In 2020, this quotation was featured on the Rhodes website but by 2025 was no longer posted there.

Ayanna took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I get really fired up when it comes to Rhodes.” Her eyes narrowed in concentration. “I mean… would I seriously turn it down? Okay, I don’t know. But I can’t shake the feeling that taking the scholarship and associating myself with that name would be a betrayal of my identity, my community, and my family’s history.”

Both women stared moodily at the swirled colors on the bedspread.

“Could we think about the scholarship like reparations for the harm Rhodes did?” Layla asked. “I might feel better about it if I took that perspective.”[16]

You could…” Ayanna conceded. “You’ve already accepted scholarship money from the College, and that money is tainted by slavery and racism, too.” She gestured towards the window, where the lights of campus twinkled brightly against the darkness of the night. “Back in the early days, enslaved people fed students and did a lot of other labor to help Harvard’s campus function smoothly.”[17]

“Yeah, good point,” Layla agreed. “And the scholarship is going to go somewhere no matter what I decide. Why shouldn’t I be the one to get the benefit of the prestige of being a Rhodes Scholar?”

Ayanna frowned. “But the Rhodes Scholarship is only so prestigious in the United States because the majority of people here have no idea what kinds of atrocities Cecil Rhodes committed, right? I mean, do you remember ever learning about him in high school history?”

“No,” Layla acknowledged. “Not even in AP World History.”[18]

The two women sat in silence for a moment, pondering Layla’s options.

“Just think it through carefully, okay?” Ayanna said as she got up. “Don’t let the prestige of it all seduce you.” The two women said goodnight, and Layla slumped back down onto her bed.

---

[16] In late 2015, controversy arose when a Rhodes scholar advocated for removing a statue of Cecil Rhodes from Oxford’s campus. Critics accused the scholar of being hypocritical. Fellow Rhodes Scholars came to the defense of the scholar, expressing some of the same perspectives that Layla considers, such as how their participation can be a form of reparation. Reparations are measures taken to repair historical harm and injustice. See more about this controversy here: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jan/12/cecil-rhodes-scholars-reject-hypocrisy-claims-amid-row-over-oriel-college-statue.

[17] Chapter 2.2 of the Report of the Presidential Committee on Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery details the labors performed by enslaved people on Harvard’s campus in the early years of the College: https://legacyofslaveryreport.harvard.edu/.

[18] For more information about the AP World History course, including guides to each unit, see: https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/ap-world-history-modern-course-and-exam-description.pdf.

It does seem like the Rhodes Trust is putting in some effort—though perhaps not as much as they were when Adam was there— to engage critically with Rhodes's legacy and make concrete changes to the scholarship program, Layla pondered. But is it enough, and do I want to be part of that effort? And what if they walk back the work even more? Then again, it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Why shouldn't I take it, given all that my family has gone through? Or would I just be contributing to the brown-washing of Rhodes's legacy, flaunting his name and letting them take credit for accepting me?[19] Should I apply for the opportunity, or should I decline it? What does it look like for me to live out my values and my heritage authentically and responsibly?

[19] "Washing" here refers to efforts by organizations to appear diverse, whether or not this matches the reality of who works in the organization. For a research study on "diversity washing," see: Koch, T., Mechler, S., & Denner, N. (2025). The diversity washing dilemma: When signaling diversity enhances image and credibility – And when it backfires. *Public Relations Review*, 51(4), 102609 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2025.102609.

To cite this case study:
Daversa, K. (2026). A Fork in the "Rhodes." *Justice in Schools*. https://www.justiceinschools.org/fork-rhodes-case and *Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery Initiative*. https://legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/normative-case-studies/.
This work is openly licensed via CC BY-NC-SA 4.0