HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

A Fork in the "Rhodes": *Reader's Theater*

Script adapted from A Fork in the "Rhodes" case study by Kate Daversa

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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.

CHARACTERS:

Narrator, Professor Richardson, Layla, Archer, Kris, Adam, Eleanor, Ayanna

NARRATOR:

It was a sunny day in early April, and Layla, a Harvard College senior, was afraid she was going to be late. 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, also there.

PROFESSOR RICHARDSON:

So good to see you both! Sorry to call you here on such short notice, but I just had to be the first one to give you the good news. I'm recommending you both to the College for endorsement for the Rhodes Scholarship!

NARRATOR:

Archer looked ecstatic, but Layla felt… excited, sure, but also shocked, apprehensive, and uncomfortable. She could feel her face getting hot.

PROFESSOR RICHARDSON:

Is everything alright, Layla? I thought you would be thrilled to hear about this opportunity.

LAYLA:

Oh no, I'm… ah… happy. 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.

NARRATOR:

Thanks to her extensive work in her African studies minor courses, 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.

ARCHER:

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

LAYLA:

Well, it's not as simple as that. Rhodes did create an incredible program with the Rhodes Scholarship, but his fortune came mostly from diamond mines in Africa, where white British capitalists and imperialists like himself profited off of the labor of native African workers—workers he called "the most despicable specimens of human beings." He was intent on bringing them and the entire continent of Africa under British rule.

PROFESSOR RICHARDSON:

A scientist *and* a historian? Why am I not surprised, Layla?

ARCHER:

Isn't that just what this is, history? 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?

PROFESSOR RICHARDSON:

Yes, the opportunity to do something positive! 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.

NARRATOR:

Before Layla could get another word in, the meeting wrapped up, and she found herself heading back out into the yard.

LAYLA:

(to herself): Did that really just happen? 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?

NARRATOR:

Later that afternoon, Layla was in the chem lab, distractedly trying to mix and pipette a solution. Unusual for her, today she kept getting the steps of the protocol wrong and dropping things.

KRIS:

Layla, need a hand over there?

LAYLA:

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

KRIS:

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:

You know me too well. Have you heard of the Rhodes Scholarship?

KRIS:

For sure! That's the super famous one for going to Oxford, right?

LAYLA:

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:

Yikes. I can see why you're struggling with that one. Rhodes kind of goes against everything you believe in, doesn't he?

LAYLA:

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.

NARRATOR:

Both students were quiet for a moment, pondering Layla's dilemma as they filled and labeled more vials.

KRIS:

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?

NARRATOR:

Right then, Adam, a new doctoral student in the lab, poked his head around the corner.

ADAM:

Did I hear you both talking about the Rhodes Scholarship?

KRIS:

Yes, Layla's being nominated by Professor Richardson.

ADAM:

Congratulations, Layla! Kris, 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.

LAYLA:

Ugh. Why?

ADAM:

I was finishing my degree at Oxford around the same time as the second Rhodes Must Fall campaign was picking up speed there, in 2020. 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. 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. I just don't want anyone else to go into a Rhodes Scholarship as naively as I did and end up facing similar disappointment.

KRIS:

I don't know, Adam—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.

ADAM:

Yeah, we made some kind of difference. And the Rhodes Trust is now requiring training for all of their Rhodes selectors to ensure their judgment is unclouded when they review applications. 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.

NARRATOR:

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.

NARRATOR:

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

LAYLA:

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

ELEANOR:

Yes, I have. Why do you ask?

LAYLA:

Well, I got nominated—

ELEANOR:

(interrupting): Oh, congratulations, honey! This is huge!

LAYLA:

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

ELEANOR:

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

LAYLA:

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. How can I apply or accept the scholarship knowing that it represents everything we are against as a family?

ELEANOR:

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.

LAYLA:

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

ELEANOR:

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 in the way of that. Oops, the oven is beeping—gotta go. I love you, honey!

NARRATOR:

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:

(to herself): Wow, there's a whole section of the site dedicated to discussing Rhodes's legacy and how the Rhodes Trust and Rhodes Scholars are engaging with it.

NARRATOR:

She kept reading; 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." 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 labored to generate this wealth." 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:

"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 benefit 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."

Right then, Layla heard a knock at the door, and Ayanna, her housemate and friend, bounded inside.

LAYLA:

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

AYANNA:

Wait, for real? What are you going to do?

NARRATOR:

Like Layla, Ayanna was studying African studies, and she was just as aware of the terrible things Rhodes had done during his lifetime.

LAYLA:

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. 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.

AYANNA:

So many other people? You mean hundreds of thousands of other people? 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!

LAYLA:

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?

AYANNA:

I'm sorry. I get really fired up when it comes to Rhodes. I mean… would I seriously turn it down? 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.

LAYLA:

Could we think about the scholarship like reparations for the harm Rhodes did? I might feel better about it if I took that perspective.

AYANNA:

You could. You've already accepted scholarship money from the College, and that money is tainted by slavery and racism, too. Back in the early days, enslaved people fed students and did a lot of other labor to help Harvard's campus function smoothly.

LAYLA:

Yeah, good point. 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:

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?

LAYLA:

No, not even in AP World History.

NARRATOR:

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

AYANNA:

Just think about it, okay? Don't let the prestige of it all seduce you.

NARRATOR:

The two women said goodnight, and Layla slumped back down onto her bed.

LAYLA:

(pondering to herself): 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. 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? Should I apply, or should I refuse the opportunity? What does it look like for me to live out my values and my heritage authentically and responsibly?

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