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“Melting Pot” or “Salad Bowl”: Lupine Metaphors and the
Myth of American Assimilation in Karen Russell's
“St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves”

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Abstract

This article examines Karen Russell's “St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” as a vivid illustration of the struggles minority groups face during assimilation into mainstream American culture. Through lupine metaphors, Russell critiques the myth of the American Dream, which promises equality and opportunity but often marginalizes and erases minority identities. The story's depiction of the wolf girls – raised in a culturally distinct lupine environment and later compelled by nuns to embrace human civilization – parallels the experiences of minorities pressured to conform to dominant norms. Their diverging fates – some fully assimilating and losing their original identity, while others resist and cling to their heritage – highlight the complexities of cultural dislocation. This tension underscores the alienation faced by individuals caught between their original community and the dominant culture. Situating “St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” within broader discussions of assimilation and the abjection of the “other,” this article argues that Russell dismantles the illusion of harmonious multiculturalism, revealing how forced assimilation leads to alienation rather than true inclusion.

Keywords: American Dream, assimilation, wolf imagery, abjection, cultural identity, Karen Russell, authenticity

Introduction

The United States has long been portrayed as a land of opportunity where people from diverse backgrounds can achieve success through hard work and perseverance. This vision is encapsulated in the American Dream, a concept that promises inclusion and equal opportunity to all. However, the reality has often been different for minority communities, who face exclusion, discrimination, and cultural erasure. Historically, the process of assimilation in the U.S. has been fraught with violence and coercion, particularly for immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups. Policies such as the Native American boarding schools, which forced Indigenous children to abandon their languages and traditions, and the expectation for immigrant groups to “Americanize” highlight how the dominant culture demands conformity rather than coexistence. The debate between the melting pot and salad bowl models of American identity reveals fundamental tensions about cultural diversity and national unity.

Horace M. Kallen first challenged the assimilationist ideal in his 1915 essay “Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot,” arguing that “Democracy involves, not the elimination of differences, but the perfection and conservation of differences. It aims, through Union, not at uniformity, but at variety” (190). He further insisted that immigrant groups must “maintain their identities, cultural expressions, religious beliefs, and even languages” while remaining loyal to democratic society (191). Grounding his vision in Midwestern pluralism – where local customs and collective life coexisted – Kallen’s model remains aspirational, as Russell dramatizes through the wolf girls’ enforced translation into human norms. Building on this pluralist promise, James Truslow Adams, who coined the term American Dream in his Preface to *The Epic of America*, defined it as “that dream of a land in which life should be

better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (xxi). He elaborated that this ideal "transcends mere material gain," envisioning "a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (xxi–xxii). Yet, for Russell's wolf girls – and for many marginalized communities – the gulf between pluralism's variety and the Dream's promise remains wide, as Langston Hughes later questioned in "Harlem," asking whether a dream deferred "dry[s] up like a raisin in the sun" and urging us to confront what happens when ideals fail those they purport to include.

The psychological dimensions of cultural assimilation have been extensively documented by scholars such as John W. Berry, whose research on acculturation reveals that successful adaptation often depends on the ability to maintain both heritage and host cultural identities – a strategy he terms "integration." However, as Berry notes, when societies enforce "assimilation" (adoption of the host culture while abandoning heritage culture), the result is often "acculturative stress" that can lead to psychological marginalization and identity confusion (176). This stress is particularly acute when the receiving society views minority cultures as inferior or threatening, requiring their complete suppression rather than accommodation. Karen Russell's short story "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" functions as a powerful allegory for this fraught process of assimilation, depicting how individuals are pressured to conform to an unfamiliar dominant culture at the cost of their original identity. The story follows a group of wolf girls – raised in a lupine environment – who are placed in a Catholic reformatory school run by nuns and forced to adopt human behaviors through a systematic five-stage "Lycanthropic Culture Shock Curriculum." This mirrors the experience of marginalized communities who are pressured to abandon their cultural roots in order to fit into American society.

The symbolism of the wolf carries deep cultural significance that Russell skillfully exploits to critique processes of othering and cultural domination. In Western literature and mythology, wolves have historically been depicted as dangerous, uncivilized creatures needing to be tamed – much like how dominant societies have sought to control and “civilize” minority groups. Jack Zipes, in his comprehensive study *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, argues that the wolf functions as “a figure of social disorder” that must be contained or destroyed to maintain social stability (23). This portrayal reflects broader anxieties about the “outsider” and the need to maintain cultural boundaries through the exclusion or transformation of the other. Conversely, many indigenous cultures view wolves very differently. Keith Basso's ethnographic work *Wisdom Sits in Places* reveals that among the Western Apache, animals like wolves are viewed as sources of wisdom and spiritual transformation, integral to cultural identity rather than threats to be eliminated (15). Similarly, Barry Lopez's *Of Wolves and Men* documents how “for many Native Americans the wolf is also a spiritual symbol, a respected animal that can strengthen the individual and the community” (12). This contrast highlights how the wolf's meaning depends entirely on cultural perspective – it can represent either the dangerous other requiring assimilation or the wise ancestor demanding respect and preservation.

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, explores how the wild woman archetype represents “the instinctual nature of women” that has been systematically suppressed by society's attempt to “civilize” individuals “into rigid roles.” Estés argues that wolves and women share “certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit, and a heightened capacity for devotion” and that “both have been hounded, harassed, and falsely imputed to be devouring and devious, overly aggressive, of less value than those who are their detractors” (58). This parallel illuminates how Russell's wolf imagery functions as a critique of the systematic targeting of those aspects of identity that challenge dominant power structures. Therefore, this article aims to explore

how wolf imagery in Russell's story serves as an allegory for forced assimilation and the abjection of the other. By analyzing the experiences of the wolf girls – who undergo different levels of assimilation, from complete transformation to outright resistance – this study will examine the psychological trauma of assimilation, the myth of the American Dream, and the construction of cultural otherness through three critical lenses: the failure of melting pot ideology, wolf symbolism as cultural critique, and the devastating psychological costs of forced cultural transformation.

The American Dream, the Melting Pot, and the Myth of Inclusion

Russell's "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" lays bare the dire contradiction at the heart of the American Dream: although it professes equal opportunity and inclusion, true acceptance demands the systematic erasure of one's original cultural identity. The girls' ordeal at St. Lucy's mirrors the historical experience of many minority groups in the United States, where assimilation has too often meant abandoning heritage rather than weaving it into a genuinely multicultural tapestry. Richard D. Alba contends that authentic multiculturalism resembles a "salad bowl," in which distinct identities coexist without being melted into a homogeneous whole (45). Yet, as he observes, American society frequently substitutes symbolic gestures for substantive inclusion (47). At St. Lucy's, the institution's aim is not a salad-bowl coexistence but a violent melting pot, in which wolf identity is expunged to preserve social order.

Henri Lefebvre's concept of the "production of space" illuminates how the school's design – sterile, windowless corridors and identical cells – enforces these social relations, casting the girls as passive recipients of cultural conversion rather than active agents of their own identity formation (33). Russell's narrative thus critiques not only the illusory promise of the American Dream but also the ways in which built environments and institutional rituals conspire to displace and disempower minority identities, revealing

assimilation as a form of spatial and cultural violence. The insidiousness of the American Dream becomes clearer when viewed through what Kallen identified as the false choice between cultural integrity and national belonging. Kallen argues that the melting-pot ideology “often meant assimilation into Anglo-Saxon American identity” rather than genuine cultural fusion (191). At St. Lucy’s, the girls cannot preserve any vestige of their lupine heritage; success demands total renunciation. Progressing through the school’s five meticulously designed stages, each new level requires a deeper suppression of innate behaviors and an ever-greater conformity to imposed human norms.

The story’s portrayal of “successful” assimilation underscores its hollowness: those girls who master human behaviors most thoroughly end up most alienated – from both their authentic selves and the community they once knew. This outcome resonates with John W. Berry’s findings on acculturation, which demonstrate that assimilation strategies often produce individuals who are culturally adrift, having severed ties to their heritage without securing genuine acceptance in the dominant culture (64). The American Dream’s promise of recognition “for what they are” thus becomes a cruel irony, since attaining recognition necessitates ceasing to be who they originally were. Russell’s depiction of systematic stripping – windowless dormitories, odorless corridors, identical metal cots – echoes the assimilation tactics of Native American boarding schools. Kirk Siegler documents how children’s hair was cut, their clothing burned, and native languages forbidden to eradicate Indigenous identities and enforce conformity (New York Times). Additionally, Brenda Child explains that these schools were designed “to rid students of all vestiges of tribal culture,” producing “docile subjects of assimilation” who endured intergenerational trauma (52). Hannah Kivalahula-Uddin further characterizes these institutions as “weapons of mass destruction” against Native identities, detailing bans on languages and ceremonies, enforced Christianity, hair cutting, destruction of traditional clothing, mandatory uniforms, and the assignment of European names – all measures that “obliterated their sense of self-

worth and destroyed their culture and traditional ways,” inflicting “deep, painful soul wounds” across generations (31–33). The parallels between these historical atrocities and the wolf girls’ experience crystallize in the school’s motto: just as boarding schools proclaimed “Kill the Indian, Save the Man,” St. Lucy’s demands that the wolf be killed to save the girl.

St. Lucy’s Home functions as a microcosm of American assimilationist ideology, where the nuns enact a civilizing mission that defines belonging by including those who conform and excluding those deemed unfit. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the “anthropological machine,” the school operates as a biopolitical apparatus sorting the wolf-girls into assimilable subjects and failures reduced to “bare life” outside the human community (Agamben 37–38). Mirabella’s expulsion exemplifies this dynamic – her refusal to conform marks her as unassimilable flesh. The *Lycanthropic Culture Shock Curriculum* exposes assimilation as a violent, deliberate process. In Stage One, the girls retain their instinctual exuberance – “all hair and snarl and floor-thumping joy” – and are allowed relative freedom in the classroom, even lying on the floor (Russell 225, 237). Their animalistic behaviors – “smashing lightbulbs, spraying urine, digging holes, and howling” – are dismissed as savagery but simultaneously act as defiant gestures of cultural preservation against the encroaching host norms (Russell 237). Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject illuminates this conflict: by urinating on bunks, the girls use bodily fluid as an abject marker that the institution must expel to uphold its symbolic borders (Kristeva 4; Russell 237). The institution itself functions as a liminal space where subject and object collide violently. The nuns, as agents of Western cultural authority, filter the girls deemed fit for assimilation from those classified as failures who must be expelled to protect this process. Mirabella’s fate as a deranged, unassimilable figure exemplifies the machine’s punitive exclusion.

The dormitory’s windowless and odorless architecture further enforces separation from the mother culture. Windows, often symbols of connection between inside and outside, are absent,

isolating the girls from the wilderness – their original cultural realm – lit by moonlight, which contrasts with the dormitory’s artificial lightbulbs representing civilization (Bachelard 212). The girls’ smashing of lightbulbs symbolizes rejection of imposed rationality and the host culture. The absence of windows signifies containment and detachment from their original identity, driving them to seek solace in darkness, reminiscent of their native environment. This space embodies Homi Bhabha’s liminal hybridity, where subjects navigate both cultural violence and the possibility of resistance (Bhabha 2). Odor is integral to identity, and its deliberate removal from the dormitory through sterilization erases olfactory memory and recognition, symbolizing a conscious effort to suppress the girls’ lupine instincts. However, this erasure is actively resisted as the girls defiantly reclaim their territory by “spraying exuberant yellow streams” on their bunks (Russell 237). The uniformity of the dorm rooms – with identical metal cots, narrow desks, and plastic chairs – obliterates both individual and pack identities, enforcing strict conformity (Russell 229). The long, echoing hallways amplify the effect of surveillance, constantly reminding the girls of the unrelenting gaze monitoring their every move (Russell 228). By Stage Three, the girls have internalized the host culture’s values, growing increasingly ashamed of their natural impulses. Claudette’s struggle to suppress instinctual behaviors, such as licking her sister’s cheek or salivating at the smell of meat, exemplifies this profound internal conflict (Russell 231). Kristeva’s assertion – “I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself” – powerfully encapsulates assimilation’s ultimate violence: the erasure of self through internalized abjection (Kristeva 2). This shame also manifests in their rejection of Mirabella, who becomes the projection of their repressed, instinctive origins. Mirabella’s resistance to abandoning her instinctive values and culture serves as a reminder of what the other girls are striving to erase within themselves, which intensifies their repulsion toward her.

Another form of this violent confrontation is embodied in the act of renaming, which exemplifies how assimilation operates as a form of cultural violence, forcibly replacing indigenous

identities with imposed ones that serve the dominant culture's need for uniformity. When Sister Maria encounters the girls for the first time, she demonstrates the power dynamics inherent in the civilizing process: "Sister Maria gave her a brave smile. 'And what is your name?' she asked. The oldest sister howled something awful and inarticulable... Sister Maria nodded and scribbled on a yellow legal pad. She slapped on a name tag: HELLO, MY NAME IS _____! 'Jeanette it is'" (Russell 226). This scene captures the essence of cultural imperialism – the systematic replacement of indigenous forms of identity with dominant culture markers. The girl's "awful and inarticulable" howl represents the untranslatable aspects of her heritage that cannot be accommodated within the institution's framework and must therefore be discarded. This renaming ritual enacts the violent redefinition of the Other, mirroring Jacques Derrida's analysis of sovereignty and bestiality, in which "the Sovereign attempts to define the Beast and subject it to his authority" (Derrida 68). Unaware of this process, the girls experience a terror of erasure that erupts in instinctive violence. Their vocalizations, dismissed by the host culture as mere howls, are reduced to echoes of their lupine origins rather than recognized as legitimate speech. This dynamic recalls John Gardner's depiction in *Grendel*, where the first linguistic encounter between the dragon-king and Grendel "redraws the boundaries" by branding the Beast as "wild, instinctive, and dangerous" (Gardner 23). Thus, the act of forcefully slapping name tags onto the girls does more than assign labels – it violently inscribes their status as odd, backward, and repulsive, an "Other" constructed through cultural and linguistic codes. The hesitant retreat of the other wolf-girls at this moment reveals an unconscious resistance to the threat of erasure, a collective instinct to defend their eroded identity.

Russell extends her critique of assimilation by showing how, from the outset, St. Lucy's transforms its pupils into creatures desperate to please their human overseers – obedient, submissive, and stripped of agency. In Stage Two, the nuns explicitly compare the girls to domestic dogs, teaching them that, like tamed animals, they must perform on command rather than become true members

of the community. As the narrator admits, “Being around other humans had awakened a slavish-dog affection in us. An abasing, belly-to-the-ground desire to please” (Russell 227). This cultivated desire to please places the girls firmly under the control of the host culture, for every act of submission is rewarded with a nod or a smile, reinforcing obedience as the sole path to acceptance. When the wolf girls learn to stand upright, speak “properly,” and suppress their instincts, they do so not as equals but as docile performers whose worth is measured by compliance. The image of wolves turned into tamed dogs in Stage Two underscores that mastery of human rituals does not confer subjectivity; it merely produces compliant “others” (Russell 230). Having pantomimed polite panting and wagged imaginary tails, the girls find themselves in a permanent in-between: no longer wolves, yet never fully acknowledged as human. Their transformation reveals that assimilation at St. Lucy’s – and by extension in American society – is a mechanism of control: acceptance is tethered to obedience, and any assertion of self is punished as deviance.

Wolf Imagery as a Symbol of Otherness and the Harm of Assimilation

The wolf imagery also connects to broader patterns of animalization used to justify cultural domination. Throughout colonial history, dominant cultures have employed animal metaphors to dehumanize marginalized populations, positioning them as closer to nature and therefore requiring civilization. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* vividly illustrates this dehumanization when Marlow encounters a group of African captives described in bestial terms: “one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone” (Conrad 82). By depicting the indigenous figures as animal-like, Conrad echoes the broader colonial discourse that equates non-Europeans with fauna, thereby rationalizing their domination and

concealment of systemic violence behind the veneer of “civilization.” However, Russell’s story subverts this pattern by presenting the wolf state as superior in many ways to the “civilized” human condition. The girls’ pack loyalty, emotional authenticity, and sensory awareness represent positive values that are lost rather than improved through the assimilation process.

The wolf serves as a multifaceted symbol in Russell’s narrative, simultaneously representing the authentic self, the marginalized other, and the untamed aspects of human nature that civilization seeks to control. Russell’s choice of wolf imagery draws on deep cultural associations while subverting traditional Western narratives about wildness and civilization. The initial description of the wolf girls establishes their natural state as one of joy, authenticity, and communal connection: “At first, our pack was all hair and snarl and floor-thumping joy. We forgot the barked cautions of our mothers and fathers, all the promises we’d made to be civilized and ladylike, couth and kempt” (Russell 225). This portrayal immediately challenges dominant culture assumptions about wildness as inherently negative or threatening. The girls’ natural behaviors – their physical expressiveness, pack loyalty, and instinctual responses – are presented not as deficiencies but as alternative forms of knowledge and social organization. Their ability to communicate through scent, body language, and shared understanding represents a sophisticated cultural system that the institutional setting cannot acknowledge or accommodate. When Claudette observes that “We could smell each other beneath the new scents of soap and bleach” (Russell 229), she highlights how assimilation operates not just at the level of behavior but at the sensory and embodied level, requiring the suppression of fundamental ways of perceiving and interacting with the world.

Stage Three reveals the emergence of internal conflicts and identity fragmentation as the girls begin to police themselves and each other. The curriculum describes this as the point where “Students begin to develop human personalities and lose their wolf instincts” (Russell 233). However, Russell’s detailed portrayal reveals this “development” as actually a process of psychological

splitting, where authentic impulses must be constantly suppressed in favor of performed behaviors. Claudette's internal experience demonstrates this violent self-division: "I had to bite my tongue to keep from howling. I had to dig my nails into my palms to keep from punching the air" (Russell 237). The physical violence she directs against herself – biting, digging nails into palms – represents the internalization of institutional violence against her natural self. The character development of Jeanette, Mirabella, and Claudette reveals three different responses to assimilationist pressure, each carrying distinct psychological costs. Jeanette represents the "successful" assimilant who achieves institutional approval at the cost of complete disconnection from her origins. Her transformation is described as total: "Jeanette was the first among us to adapt to her new culture. She spoke English without a trace of accent" (Russell 234). However, Russell provides subtle indicators of Jeanette's profound loss. When Claudette finds her reading about wolves in the library, "her face was lit up by the glow of the computer screen, and there were tears streaming down her cheeks" (Russell 237).

The tears reveal the emotional cost of her successful transformation – she can now access her heritage only through the mediated form of human literature, having lost direct connection to her wolf identity. This scene illustrates what Bhabha identifies as the psychological condition of colonial subjects who exist in a "third space" between cultures, fully belonging to neither (36-37). Even after climbing "high enough in the rankings that she could afford to talk to the scruggliest wolf-girl" (Russell 240), Jeanette remains the only one who will still address Mirabella, as though preserving a final tether to her lupine past. Her success in human terms becomes a form of exile from her authentic self, demonstrating how assimilation can produce subjects who are culturally successful but psychologically displaced. Although Jeanette appears to epitomize the fully assimilated subject, her native instincts persistently resurface through involuntary dreams. Jeanette's dreams vividly revive her suppressed wolf instincts, demonstrating Freud's idea that repressed material "returns in

disguised form” through the unconscious (Freud 154). In one dream, she moves silently beneath moonlit trees, senses alert to every rustle – an echo of the pack’s collective memories born from “drinking from the same water” of St. Lucy’s ideological training (Russell 242). These shared nocturnal visions act as both nostalgic longings for their lupine heritage and as symptoms of the unconscious mind rebelling against forced assimilation. Rather than erasing their true nature, St. Lucy’s coercive regime buries the girls’ wolf identity below conscious awareness, where it survives as persistent, haunting yearnings that surface each night despite their daytime conformity.

Mirabella represents the opposite extreme – complete resistance to assimilation that results in her expulsion from the community entirely. Her character raises critical questions about the limited options available to those who cannot or will not conform to dominant cultural demands. During the climactic Sausalito, the wolf-girls’ solidarity finally fractures under the pressures of assimilationist competition. As Mirabella lunges to shield Claudette – “Chewed through her restraints and tackled me from behind, barking at unseen cougars, trying to shield me with her tiny body” (Russell 243) – only one sister stands apart. Jeanette, the pack’s most “successful” member, watches Claudette’s silent plea and offers no aid; instead, she rewards herself with a wolf smile, her lips curling in triumph rather than concern (Russell 244). This moment reveals the corrosive harm of assimilationist policy: once united as a wolf-pack, the girls turn on one another, sacrificing mutual loyalty for individual advancement. Mirabella’s instinct to protect her sister reflects original cultural bonds, yet even her fierce devotion cannot counteract the institution’s demand for self-interest. Claudette’s refusal of Mirabella’s help – accepting isolation over solidarity – signals how assimilation breeds internal division, transforming once-cohesive minority communities into fractious competitors whose only loyalty is to the host culture’s meritocratic hierarchy. Besides, the aftermath of this incident reveals the violence that underlies seemingly benevolent assimilationist policies. Rather than attempting to accommodate Mirabella’s

different learning needs or cultural perspectives, the institution simply eliminates her: “In the morning, Mirabella was gone. We checked under all the beds. I pretended to be surprised” (Russell 244). Her disappearance becomes a form of institutional murder – not physical death, but cultural and social erasure. The other girls’ complicity in this erasure, including Claudette’s pretense of surprise, demonstrates how assimilation creates subjects who participate in the marginalization of those who resist cultural transformation.

Claudette’s position is uniquely fraught: as narrator, she embodies both the achievement and the cost of assimilation. When she reports that she is “halfway into Jack London’s *The Son of the Wolf*” and reading at a fifth-grade level (Russell 234), this milestone signals her mastery of human language and literature, yet it also deepens her sense of divided self. The irony of learning English through tales that valorize lupine endurance only underscores the tension she feels: she must perform perfect human civility even as she remembers the instincts that once defined her. Throughout the story, Claudette must constantly monitor her speech, posture, and emotions to avoid revealing the “wolf impulses” beneath the surface. This relentless self-surveillance mirrors Gloria Anzaldúa’s description of living “in the borderlands,” where one cultivates “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” and develops a “mestiza consciousness” that negotiates two worlds yet fully belongs to neither (Anzaldúa 77–78). When she comforts Mirabella’s cries of exclusion during the debutante ball, Claudette experiences the sharp pain of complicity in cultural erasure, underscoring how assimilation demands betrayal of one’s community. Thus, her reading of *The Son of the Wolf* becomes a metaphor for her own fractured identity. Like the mestiza, Claudette blends two worlds: she wields human tools and customs with skill, but she can never forget the freedom of running on all fours. As a result, her assimilation remains incomplete – a constant balancing act between belonging and alienation.

Stages four and five – where students are meant to feel at home in human culture and move effortlessly between worlds – collapse in Claudette’s final return. The story’s conclusion provides

the most devastating critique of assimilation's promises. Despite her apparent success in human terms, she discovers that transformation has made genuine homecoming impossible. Her mother's reaction captures the painful irony of assimilationist achievement: "My mother recoiled from me, as if I was a stranger. . . She sank her teeth into my ankle, looking proud and sad" (Russell 246). The mother's simultaneous pride and sadness acknowledge both Claudette's institutional success and the cultural loss it represents. The biting gesture – painful but loving – represents the family's recognition that their daughter has become irretrievably changed. Claudette's final lie – "I'm home" – reveals her awareness that true return is impossible after the assimilation process (Russell 246). This moment captures what Edward Said identifies as the exile's fundamental condition, "double alienation," where displacement creates subjects who can never fully belong to either their original or adopted communities (Said 140). The lie protects her family from the full knowledge of her transformation while acknowledging her own recognition that the person who left for St. Lucy's no longer exists. This protective deception parallels Marlow's climactic lie to Kurtz's Intended in *Heart of Darkness*, when he tells her that Kurtz's final words were "your name" rather than "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 70). Both lies emerge from the speakers' traumatic encounters with systems of cultural domination – imperial conquest in Conrad's case, forced assimilation in Russell's – and both function to shield loved ones from truths too devastating to bear. However, the parallel reveals a crucial distinction: while Marlow's lie preserves the colonial mythology that enables continued imperial violence, Claudette's lie emerges from her own condition of permanent displacement. Where Marlow can return to European society and maintain the comfortable distance necessary for his protective deception, Claudette embodies the very violence she seeks to conceal. Her lie functions not just as protection for her family, but as a desperate attempt to maintain connection across the unbridgeable gap that assimilation has created. She embodies what Said terms "an intellectual and existential condition" of perpetual displacement,

someone who “exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old” (Said 49). The wolf girls' various fates – Jeanette's successful but alienated transformation, Mirabella's resistance and elimination, Claudette's painful in-betweenness – demonstrate that there are no truly positive outcomes within assimilationist frameworks that demand the sacrifice of authentic cultural identity. Their fates collectively reveal that the American Dream of becoming a single harmonious entity is, in fact, a myth, masking the deep conflicts and losses inherent in such forced conformity.

Conclusion

Karen Russell's “St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” offers a profound critique of American assimilationist ideology and its psychological violence against minority communities. Through the allegorical framework of wolf girls forced to become human, Russell exposes the fundamental contradictions inherent in the American Dream's promise of inclusion through cultural transformation. The story demonstrates that the melting pot metaphor, rather than creating genuine multiculturalism, operates as a mechanism of cultural domination that systematically destroys minority identities while producing subjects who remain perpetually displaced. The wolf imagery functions as a powerful vehicle for critiquing how dominant cultures construct and maintain categories of otherness. By positioning the girls' natural behaviors as threatening and primitive, the institutional setting at St. Lucy's mirrors real-world processes through which minority cultures have been pathologized and targeted for elimination. Russell's subversive use of wolf symbolism – presenting wildness as authentic and valuable rather than dangerous – challenges Western cultural assumptions about civilization and progress while highlighting alternative frameworks that honor rather than destroy cultural difference.

The story's systematic exploration of assimilation's psychological costs reveals the profound violence inherent in

policies that demand cultural sacrifice for social acceptance. The three main characters' different responses to assimilationist pressure – Jeanette's successful but alienating transformation, Mirabella's resistance and expulsion, and Claudette's painful existence between worlds—demonstrate that current approaches to cultural integration create subjects who can never achieve authentic belonging anywhere. This critique remains urgently relevant in contemporary discussions of immigration, multiculturalism, and cultural identity. Russell's narrative ultimately argues for forms of social integration that accommodate rather than eliminate cultural differences. The tragedy of Claudette's final homecoming, where she lies about belonging while recognizing her fundamental displacement, suggests that genuine inclusion requires structural changes in how dominant societies approach cultural diversity. Rather than demanding that minorities abandon their heritage to gain acceptance, true democratic inclusion would create spaces for multiple forms of cultural expression and knowledge. Ultimately, “St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” serves as both a memorial to those cultures lost through forced assimilation and a call for new approaches to inclusion based on genuine respect for cultural difference.

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