

Environmentalism and Pastoral Nature

ENG/ENV M30:
Environment across & Cultures
Prof. Heise
Spring 2023

Environmental Masterplot #2:

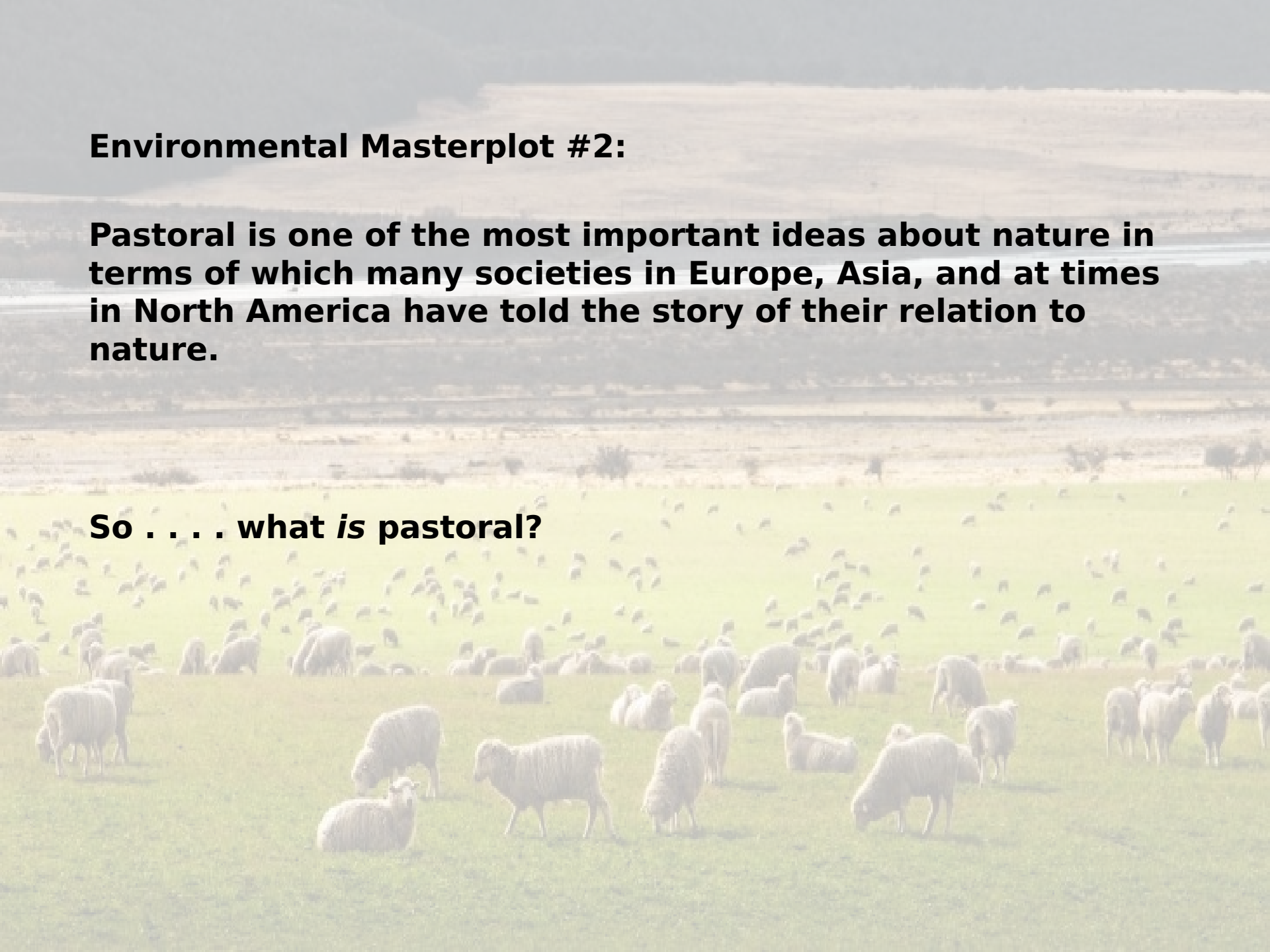
Pastoral is one of the most important ideas about nature in terms of which many societies in Europe, Asia, and at times in North America have told the story of their relation to nature.



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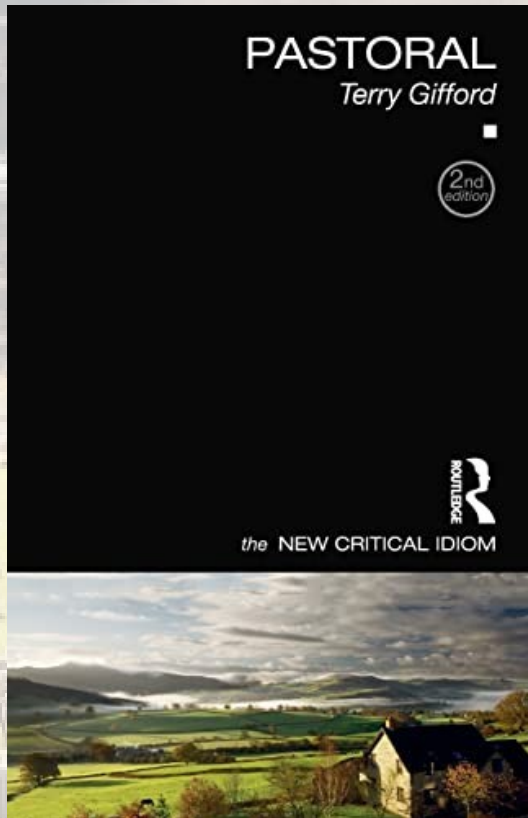
So what *is* pastoral?



Four Kinds of Pastoral

1. Literary and artistic genre that idealizes the countryside

- Literary texts (often poems) and paintings representing an idealized vision of a traditional countryside, often involving shepherd and shepherdesses
- Typically gloss over or ignore the work involved in agriculture/ agroforestry and the social inequalities it relies on
- Often focus on love relationships
- Plot often describes an escape or retreat to the countryside and then a return to the city or court with an altered perspective



1999/2020

Four Kinds of Pastoral

2. Any narrative that opposes city and country, with clear preference for the country

- Country as positive contrast to the city, which is described in negative terms
- Typically foregrounds enjoyment and beauty of nature – often nature that has been altered by humans



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Four Kinds of Pastoral

3. Pastoral as a term of criticism

- Foregrounds the difference between literary idealization of nature and its real state: reality of pollution, difficult work conditions, inequality
- Sometimes used by environmentalists to foreground how landscapes have been degraded



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Four Kinds of Pastoral

4. Pastoral as a neutral description of certain kinds of agriculture

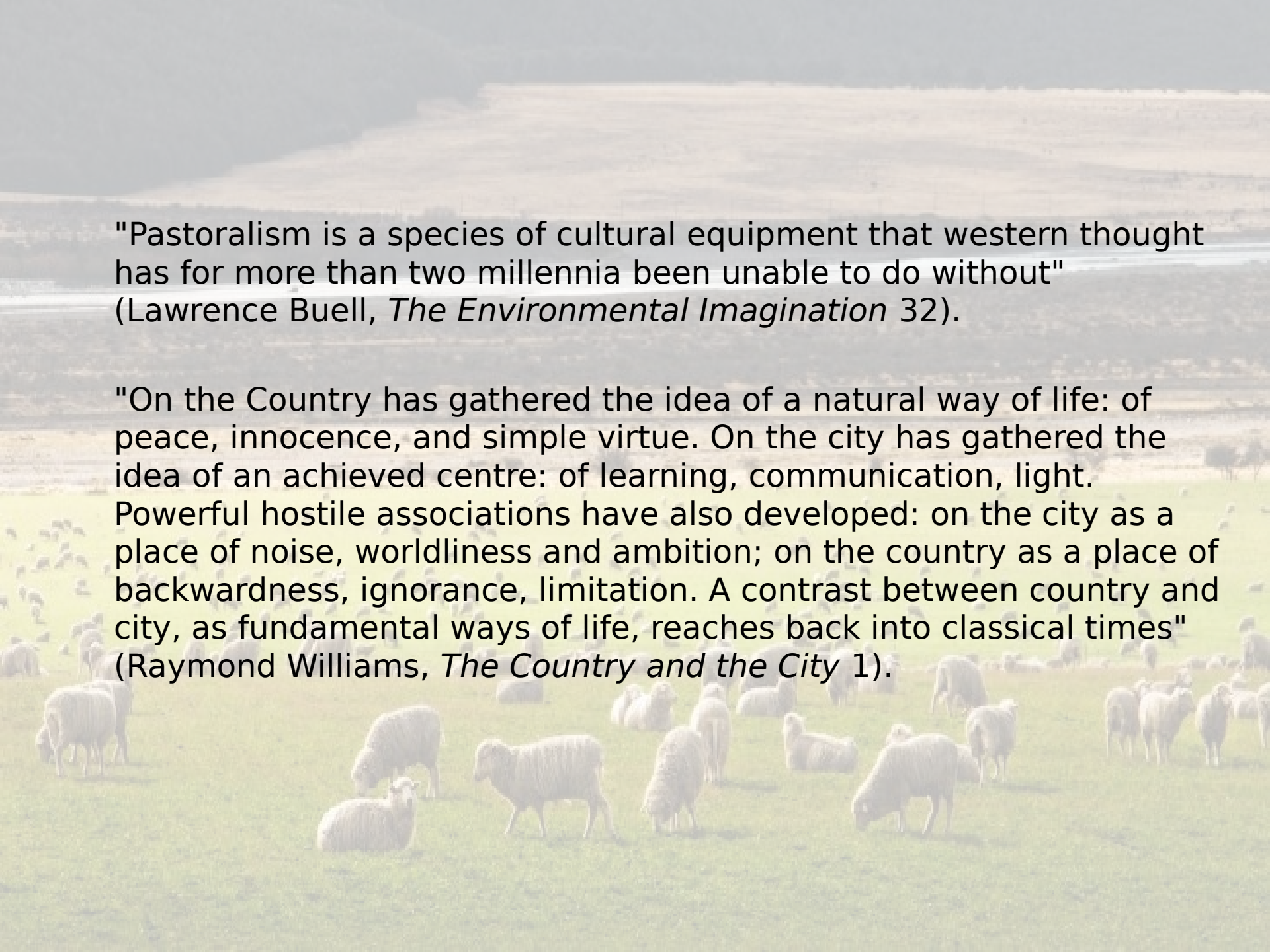
- Description of life in the countryside with focus on grazing animals, but without any idealization



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Environmental thinking and activism in Europe and Asia have often been galvanized by visions of an idealized countryside (Gifford's pastoral #2) rather than by visions of an idealized wilderness.



A soft-focus background image of a rural landscape. In the foreground, a large flock of white sheep is grazing on a green field. The middle ground shows rolling hills covered in vegetation, and the background features more distant hills under a hazy sky.

"Pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without" (Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 32).

"On the Country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times" (Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* 1).



Claude Lorrain, *A Pastoral Landscape with Ruined Temple* (1638)



Francesco Zuccarelli, *Bacchanal* (mid-1740s)



John Constable: *Wivenhoe Park, Essex* (1816)

Pastoral: A Brief History

- **Pastoral in Greek and Latin literature:**
Hesiod, Theocritus, Virgil's *Georgics* and *Eclogues*
discussion of country life, especially shepherds' life
often associated with "Arcadia," a golden age of simple lives
country life is work life



Pastoral: A Brief History

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➤ **Renaissance pastoral:**

Country life, especially that of shepherd, as contrast to and escape from
the corruption of court and city

Country life is often populated by aristocrats dressed up as shepherds

Country life envisioned as a life of leisure, pleasure, dance, sexuality



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➤ **Romantic pastoral in Britain:**

Country life as escape from the city and industrial work
Simplicity and pleasure often used to gloss over the realities of agriculture
Influence of the sublime



George Cole, Pastoral Landscape (1873)



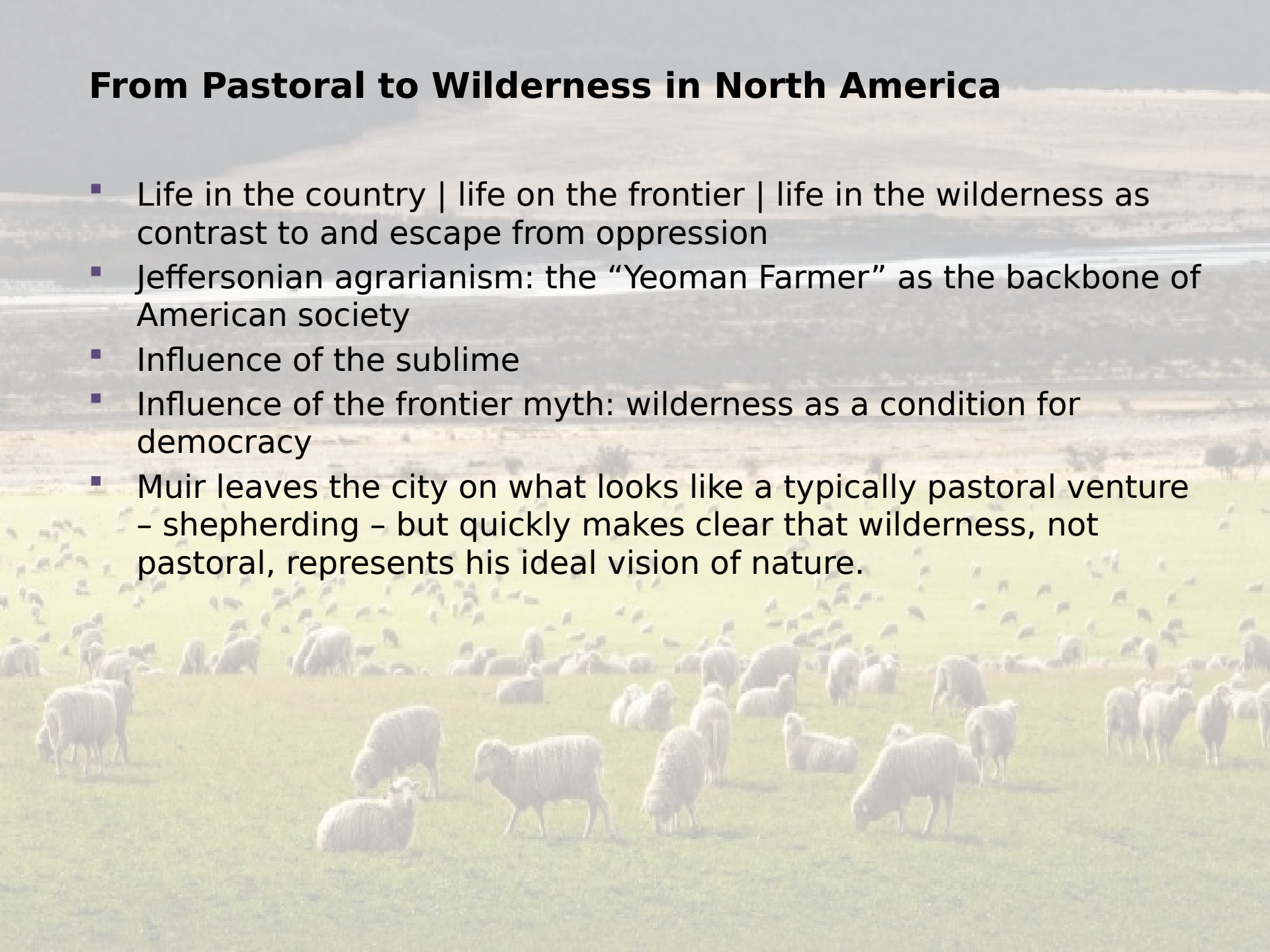
John Frederick Kensett, *Mount Washington* (1869)

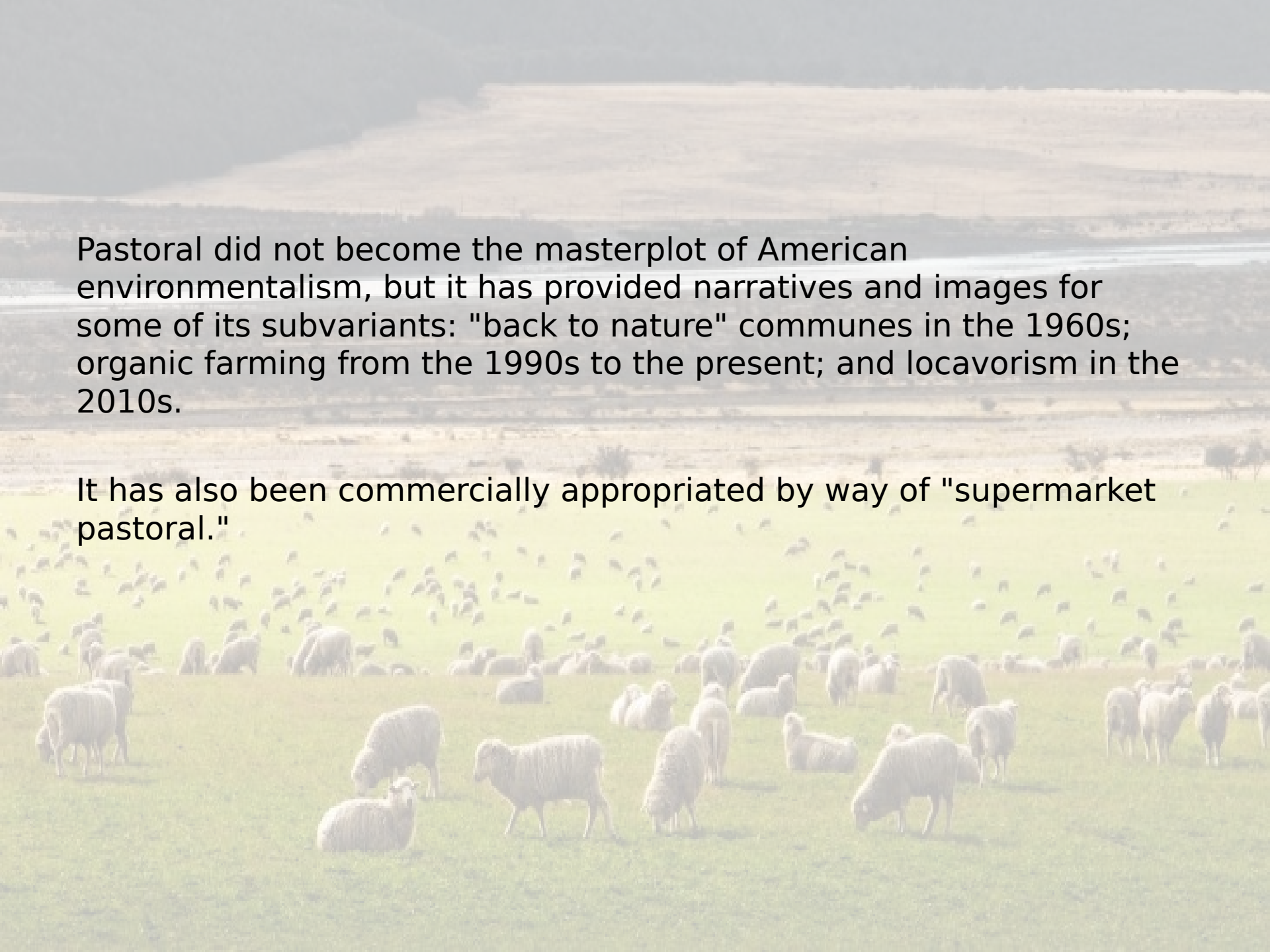
Jefferson and Agrarianism: The "Yeoman Farmer" as the Backbone of America

- **Thomas Jefferson: Pastoral ideal of American society**
- Idea that the foundation of American politics and culture lay in agriculture and the independent yeoman farmer: "those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God" (opposed to Hamilton's vision below)
- Values associated with the farmer:
 - economic self-sufficiency, self-reliance and political independence
 - source of honor, integrity, manliness
 - connection to the soil, the place and the region
 - connection to cultural tradition
 - connection to nature as a spiritual good in and of itself
- Jefferson saw the limits to the availability of land even in the early 19th century; promoted careful use of land and new farming techniques (e.g. crop rotation)
- In conflict with **Alexander Hamilton's idea of an industrial America**

From Pastoral to Wilderness in North America

- Life in the country | life on the frontier | life in the wilderness as contrast to and escape from oppression
- Jeffersonian agrarianism: the “Yeoman Farmer” as the backbone of American society
- Influence of the sublime
- Influence of the frontier myth: wilderness as a condition for democracy
- Muir leaves the city on what looks like a typically pastoral venture – shepherding – but quickly makes clear that wilderness, not pastoral, represents his ideal vision of nature.



A large flock of sheep is grazing in a lush green field. The sheep are scattered across the foreground and middle ground, some standing and some lying down. In the background, there are rolling hills and a body of water under a clear sky.

Pastoral did not become the masterplot of American environmentalism, but it has provided narratives and images for some of its subvariants: "back to nature" communes in the 1960s; organic farming from the 1990s to the present; and locavorism in the 2010s.

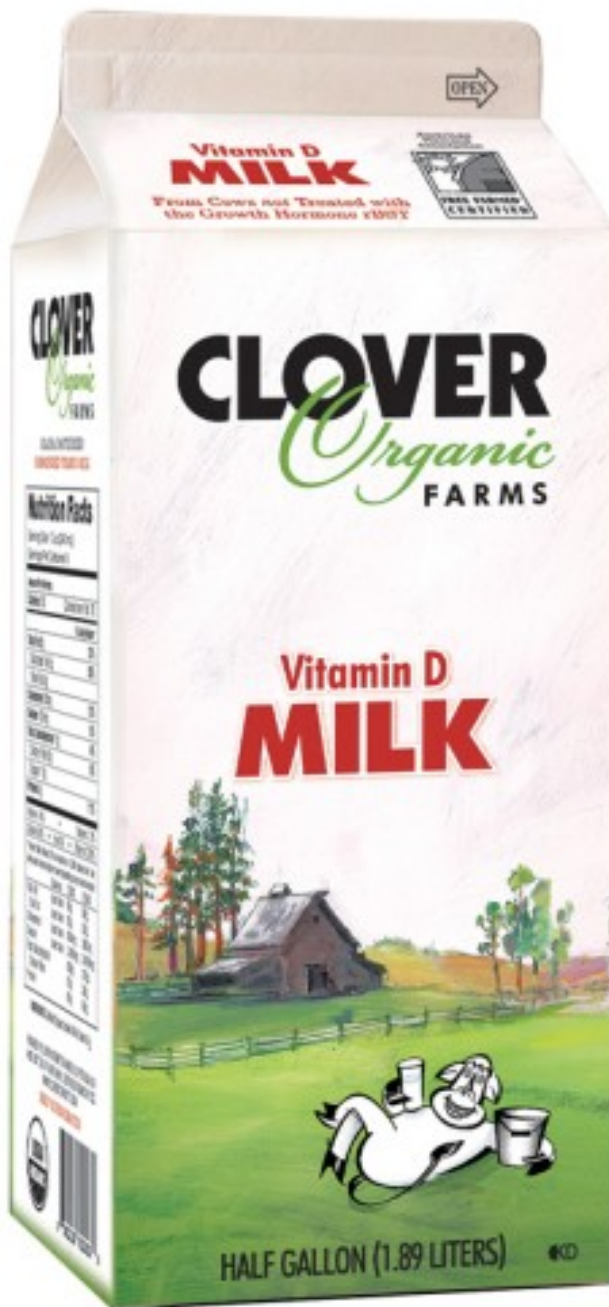
It has also been commercially appropriated by way of "supermarket pastoral."



Cascadian Farm, owned by General Mills



Supermarket Pastoral: Cascadian Farm, owned by General Mills



Clo the Cow, icon of Clover
Stornetta Farms