Is there anything left to be said about the agonizing drudgery that is Israel–Palestine? Even the question itself feels old. After all, the paradigm of settler colonialism has long been established, the extenuating historical circumstances are well known, and the violence of occupation continues to make itself felt on a daily basis. What possible political, economic, or historical angles remain that could further our understanding of the conflict? The skeptic in me says none. Luckily, there are scholars like Saree Makdisi hard at work to reveal just how misplaced such skepticism is, showing us that yes, there is more to be learned, and deeper understandings to be gained, if only we look in the right places and through the right lenses.

*Tolerance is a Wasteland: Palestine and the Culture of Denial* is an immensely satisfying book. By looking in new places in new ways, it scratches an intellectual itch that I suspect many of us interested in the conflict have but few can fully articulate: Namely, how can the opposite of something known to be true also be perceived as true, over and over again? Or to put it more concretely: Why do liberals and progressives (mostly American, mostly Jewish) continue to support Israel despite the patent illiberality of that country’s politics and practices? Given that the author of *Tolerance is a Wasteland*, Saree Makdisi, is a Professor of English and Comparative Literature, he poses the central question of the book far more elegantly. He asks:

How can a violent project of colonial dispossession and racial discrimination be repackaged ... into something that can be imagined, felt, and profoundly believed in as though it were the exact opposite: the embodiment of ecological regeneration, multicultural tolerance and democratic idealism?

Makdisi not only raises this seemingly impossible question, he answers it.

The mechanism responsible for repackaging the uglier truths of Zionism and Israeli statecraft vis-à-vis Palestinian is something that Makdisi terms “the denial
of denial” (10). As spelled out in the introduction, this compounded form of denial involves not simply looking away from acts of exclusion and injustice, but constructing a positive set of values directly linked to (in some cases literally on top of) the original denial that then actively works to occlude it. *Tolerance is a Wasteland* thus builds on Mitchell Plitnick and Marc Lamont Hill’s recent book *Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics* (2022). But whereas the earlier work identifies and critiques the liberal denial of Palestinian rights – itself no small task – Makdisi goes a step further to map out the spaces (rhetorical and physical) where denial takes place, and how it in turn becomes entrenched through the accrual of affirmative concepts and acts.

This is easier to understand in practice than in theory. The book begins with a detailed introduction, followed by four thematic chapters, titled, “Sustainability,” “Democracy,” “Diversity,” and “Tolerance,” each one fleshing out a different area in which the denial of denial is operative. Chapter 1, “Sustainability,” deals with the particular form of “greenwashing” practiced by Israel. It begins with 1948, and the destruction of not only hundreds of Palestinian villages, but also Palestine’s natural heritage, including tens of thousands of acres of olive and citrus groves and surrounding scrubland. Most scholarly treatments of the nakba tend to stop at documenting and analyzing the devastation, which, again, is crucial work. But Makdisi pushes the analysis further. He shows how insult is added to injury as the original denial (i.e., destruction) of the Palestinian landscape is itself denied by covering up its very absence with claims to ecojustice and environmentalism. That is to say, the deforestation of Palestine is made complete through the afforestation of Israel (and vice versa). Nor is this a covert or shameful operation. As Makdisi reminds us, there is a strong performative and naming aspect to the project of tree planting in Israel (the author helpfully invokes Norman Klein’s idea of “scripted spaces” here) (36), which the Jewish National Fund has long since used as a fundraising tool. How can planting a tree be an act of ethnic cleansing? Through the denial of denial. Makdisi makes the reader see what generations of liberals dutifully stuffing coins into Jewish National Fund boxes do not, or will not: the scorched ruins of Palestine below the greenscaping. After reading this chapter, I was surprised that the book’s title does not directly refer to the poem by T. S. Eliot, though it certainly could, recalling in particular the line: “And the dead tree gives no shelter … the cricket, dry rock …”

Once the denial of denial has been identified, it becomes hard not to see it everywhere. In Chapter 2, Makdisi examines the rhetorical gymnastics involved in promoting Israel as “the only democracy in the Middle East” (47). This in turn lays the ideological groundwork for accepting Israel’s claim to being a “Jewish Democracy,” not just as a possibility, but as a reality despite the fact that a state – any state – can exist in service to all of its citizens, or privilege one group. But it
cannot do both, and it cannot be considered a democracy if it does the latter. Yet the claim of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state has been widely accepted and reiterated by democratic politicians including Kamala Harris, Hilary Clinton, and Barack Obama. The discussion then extends to Israel’s strategies for denying accusations of racism and apartheid through the assertion of their opposites: pluralism and openness, etc. With Makdisi as our guide, we are soon entering into a world of Alice in Wonderland logic, as a later epigraph from *Through the Looking Glass* alludes to. Chapter 3 dissects one of Israel’s loudest claims: sexual diversity. On the international stage (much less so on the Jewish stage, where in fact the Orthodox often hold wildly intolerant views on this issue), Israeli *hasbara* promotes the country as a haven for LGBTQ communities. The various levels of hypocrisy involved in this positioning, known popularly as pinkwashing, is likely the most familiar of the themes treated in the book, but it takes on new meaning in the current framework by revealing how the denial of denial “works on those who practice it, not on those at whom it is ostensibly directed” (101). That is, rather than bolstering Israel’s claims to diversity, pinkwashing has intensified opposition to Israel by the growing number of people who recognize it for what it is. (I can report that pinkwashing is a consistently popular topic for undergraduate theses at my own university.) Chapter 4 discusses the ironically named “Museum of Tolerance” in Jerusalem, which was planned and broke ground in the early 2000s, despite the fact that its footprint overlay part of a Muslim cemetery dating back to the Crusades. (Also, it turns out it is not really much of a museum at all, but more of a convention center.) This chapter includes a discussion of the choice of Frank Gehry as the original architect for the “Museum” and a careful analysis of the exclusionary design he submitted. Gehry actually withdrew from the project as it became increasingly controversial, though only after “unpleasantly responding” (129) to an article Makdisi had written about it in *Critical Inquiry.*

One of the great strengths of *Tolerance is a Wasteland* is the author’s agile use of psychoanalytic theory, making Makdisi part of a small but growing cohort that is usefully applying Freud’s (and, to a lesser extent, Lacan’s) ideas to MENA societies. This group includes Omnia El Shakry on Egypt (2017), Stefania Pandolfo on Morocco (2018), and Dina al-Kassim on gender and post-colonialism (2013), all of whom are to varying degrees influenced by Edward Said’s own longstanding engagement with psychoanalysis. Here, Makdisi’s argument relies heavily on Freud’s enduring idea of the existence of an unconscious. The unconscious is where those truths that are too painful to openly acknowledge live, thus giving rise to the need for denial in the first place, i.e., to obscure the things we refuse to see. Makdisi explains his approach to these ideas in footnote 9 of the introduction (188–189), and again in part verbatim in footnote 12 (191). Although denial features most prominently, the book invokes the whole gamut of psychoanalytic concepts,
including paranoia, erasure, obsession, narcissism, guilt, and fetishization, all in the service of diagnosing a very specific, and very puzzling, pathology.

Freud’s ideas were originally conceived of in clinical terms, as they relate to individuals. Applying his theories to collectivities has historically posed a challenge to scholars for this reason, but here the usage rings true. It takes clear prose and convincing examples to sustain a critique with this level of complexity. *Tolerance is a Wasteland* lacks for neither. The one minor issue I had with the writing has to do with the occasional interjection of sarcasm into the narrative. For example, I lost count of the number of times the word “wonderful” was used to drive home an important point about the positive claims made in the process of denying denial, as in how “wonderful Israeli law is” (165); Israel’s “wonderful values of ‘tolerance’” (131); “wonderful green Israel” (35); “wonderful Israel and how kindly it treats its ‘Arabs’” (175); and how “wonderfully democratic Israel is supposed to be” (60). Additional moments of unnecessary (if fully understandable) snark come in statements like the one referring to Danny Danon as Israel’s other ambassador to the United Nations, after US Ambassador Nikki Haley (69). But perhaps I have lost my sense of humor in this area. Still, in a book sensitive to gender issues, I could not help but find fault with the statement that “Both Christianity and Islam permit their adherents to marry outside their faith communities” (62). If they are men, that is.

*Tolerance is a Wasteland* concludes with a lengthy postscript involving a series of exchanges between Makdisi and two colleagues, Russell Berman and Cary Nelson, stemming from the debates over adopting a Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) resolution that took place within the Modern Language Association in 2017. These exchanges – many of them already published – seem to have left Makdisi with a bad taste in his mouth, and no wonder. The rhetorical strategies used by his colleagues were in many cases vulgar (including crude racist insinuations). But they also serve to illustrate the modes of denial the book itself investigates, which is the reason why Makdisi includes them here. And yet, this whole last section feels somewhat unnecessary after the compelling story that precedes it. I would have preferred to let the book stand on its own merits. I did not need to see the denial of denial in action in the context of an academic feud; I was already convinced. That said, the postscript does a certain service by bringing one of the preferred arms in the arsenal of denial to the forefront. In a section entitled “Denial and the Old Lie: or, ‘Anti-Semitism’ and Argument,” Makdisi walks a tightrope of his own making when the denial of denial is (mis)interpreted as “Jewish duplicity” by his detractors. But it is a tightrope all liberals and progressives must learn to walk, for until we are able to address these difficult questions head on and honestly, as Makdisi demonstrates, the core truths of Israel–Palestine will remain forever out of reach.
This is a powerful and necessary book. Its arguments are largely irrefutable. *Tolerance is a Wasteland* identifies the mechanisms by which progressives and liberals have come to be such strong supporters of social justice, human rights, and Zionism, despite the obvious contradiction between these different allegiances. The denial of denial that *Tolerance is a Wasteland* tracks is specific to the left, however. The right-wing in Israel and its supporters in America are decidedly less neurotic:

*Morris, Lieberman, and Sofer all do [support the creation and maintenance of an exclusively Jewish state], and they explain why they do in perfectly rational terms: if mass killing and ethnic cleansing are what is required, then so be it. At least they are honest about it.*

(5)

That statement is sadly true, even if I am slightly wary of the implicit binary between neurotic “thinking” Ashkenazi Jews (the majority of whom are left-wing) and less cerebral MENA Jews (the majority of whom are right-wing) that this reading also suggests. But more importantly, with the rise of a new generation of right-wing American Zionists like Avi Berkowitz and Jared Kushner on the one hand, and the growing fragmentation of American liberals on the other, particularly with regard to issues like BDS and internal Israeli politics (witness the current hoopla over proposed changes to the Israeli supreme court), I fear that liberals and progressives, hypocritical as they may be, are becoming increasingly irrelevant to the conflict. Have the crucial lessons of *Tolerance is a Wasteland* come too late?

**Notes**