Preface

> No prairie fire ever sped more swiftly than the hilarious tiding that Saad Zaglul [Sa'd Zaghlul], whose arrest had made him a national martyr, was free [April 7, 1919]. . . . Apparently the masses thought that independence had been granted to Egypt. There could be no doubt of the appeal of patriotism to the hearts of even the humblest. A man at a London desk might contend that the lower classes of Egyptians neither know nor care anything about nationalism, but no honest person looking upon the Cairo outburst would believe so for a moment. —William T. Ellis, *Washington Post*, June 21, 1919

The 1919 Revolution, which erupted when the British arrested and exiled the Egyptian nationalist leader Sa'd Zaghlul, demonstrates the need to incorporate nonelites into the historical narrative. Thousands of Egyptians from all backgrounds took to the streets, protesting the exile of Zaghlul and demanding an end to British occupation. According to British Foreign Office reports, "Street boys, lower-class natives and seed vendors" publicly chanted new songs in colloquial Egyptian that insulted British officials and called for the immediate evacuation of the British from Egypt.[1]

Despite the obvious populist characteristics of the 1919 Revolution, the existing historiography places Egyptian nationalism primarily within the realm of elite politics. Missing from these narratives are everyday Egyptians and the colloquial language used to address them. In this book I investigate the agency of ordinary Egyptians in constructing and negotiating national identity. I challenge the idea that nationalism was disseminated predominantly by European-educated intellectuals. Certainly European conceptions of nationhood and the state had an important impact on the formulation of a "modern" Egyptian identity; however, to be effective,

these "ideas" had to be reworked, reconstructed, and transformed into a form that was meaningful to a local Egyptian milieu, and equally they had to be in a language that everyone understood. A principal reason that the Egyptian urban masses are not well represented in the literature is the neglect of colloquial Egyptian sources. Unlike Fusha (Modern Standard Arabic), colloquial Egyptian is spoken and understood by all Egyptians regardless of class, literacy, or education level, making it a better, more comprehensive barometer of the cultural trajectory of Egyptian society as a whole.

For this reason, in this book I primarily focus on Egyptian mass culture and on works that were mostly written, performed, or recorded in colloquial Egyptian; these diverse works include the satirical press, vaudeville plays, recorded songs, and *azjal* (colloquial poetry).[2] By incorporating performance and sound media, especially the rising record industry, I strive to expand the historical study of this period beyond just the visual and the printed to include sound and aural/oral expressions of culture. This larger field allows for much wider audiences, because the vast majority of Egyptians who were illiterate had the potential at least of directly listening to and engaging with these songs and performances.

This book is not meant to be a comprehensive study of Egyptian nationalism, but I aim to examine the beginnings of territorial Egyptian national identity through a popular culture lens. In contrast to most studies on early Egyptian nationalism, intellectuals and the political elite, who wrote predominantly in Fusha, do not figure prominently in this book. Instead of intellectuals, such as Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Lutfi al-Sayyid, and Taha Husayn, I discuss the cultural contributions of musicians, singers, actors, and popular playwrights, such as 'Uthman Jalal, Badi' Khayri, 'Amin Sidqi, Najib al-Rihani, Sayyid Darwish, and Munira al-Mahdiyya. In other words, my book is about the dissemination of a nationalist ideology to the masses and how this ideology was translated and acted on in the streets and not about the intellectual debates surrounding the formation of Egyptian national identity. Not only were recorded colloquial music, vaudeville, *azjal*, and the popular press the most effective tools for the dissemination of nationalist ideas to the majority of Egyptians, but they also provided the space necessary for a nascent middle class to construct and maintain new, "modern" identities.

Finally, in this book I also engage with some of the theories of nationalism and test their applicability to Egypt and the Arab world. I introduce the concept of media capitalism, which expands the historical analysis of Egyptian nationalism beyond just print and silent reading through the incorporation of audiovisual, sound, and performance media. By integrating these new media, especially the burgeoning record industry, I at-

tempt to make room for both the ear and the eye—for the aural and oral alongside the visual and written—and in the process provide a more comprehensive explanation for how individuals and communities digest and embody cultural information. Cultural productions, in any form, are not socially relevant unless they are communally and socially activated; they must be discussed, breathed, and animated in the routine of everyday life.