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### Abstract

An Asian elephant called Topsy was electrocuted in front of 1500 spectators by Thomas Edison in New York on January 4, 1903. Her life represents the treatment of animals exploited by the entertainment industry and symbolises America’s industrial empire. The footage shot by Edison of Topsy’s electrocution is recognised as an important development in film-making history. Edison wanted to prove direct current was safer than alternating current (the alternative promoted by his rival, George Westinghouse) and thereby win the battle to electrify America. This chapter explores the biography of Topsy as an individual elephant whose life and death played a prominent role in the development of the animal industrial complex and the USA as an industrial, capitalist empire.

### Keywords (separated by “ - ”)

Elephant - Topsy - Circus - Electricity - Edison - New York

### AUTHOR QUERIES

Q1: “United States” has been changed to “USA” when used as noun throughout the text to maintain consistency. Please check if it is correct.
CHAPTER 12

Topsy: The Elephant We Must Never Forget

Kim Stallwood

INTRODUCTION

They say an elephant never forgets. If only we were equally capable of remembering every elephant whose life was ended by hunting, poaching, habitat loss and destruction, and human greed for their ivory, we may not be witnessing their impending extinction. There are fewer than 50,000 elephants in Asia and half a million in Africa.¹ About 100 years ago, there were 100,000 elephants in Asia and 5 million in Africa.

There is one Asian elephant whose biography recounts a tragic life and a gruesome death we should never forget. Topsy’s biography reveals archaic animal cruelty unimaginable today; nonetheless, harm to individual elephants and threats to entire populations are as significant now as they were in her time. Moreover, this elephant, who was born around 1875 and came to an untimely death in 1903, unwittingly played a prominent role in the development of the USA as an industrial empire and producer of films and entertainment. In writing Topsy’s biography, I draw from contemporaneous newspaper reports and other sources, including

¹ Mathiesen, “Elephants.”

K. Stallwood (✉)
Independent Scholar, Hastings, UK

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A. Krebber, M. Roscher (eds.), Animal Biography,
Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature,
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elephant traders and trainers, regarding key moments in her life; information about other elephants who also lived in zoos and circuses during that period; and current research regarding the sentience of elephants living in the wild and in captivity that also yield insight into their thoughts and emotions. Topsy’s life mattered to her, and her biography deserves to be known. The function of a biography is to make the subject visible by recovering and reconstructing the life of an individual, regardless of species. Empowered with this enlightened perspective, the false claims of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism in writing the biography of nonhuman animals are rejected. Empathy and compassion for nonhuman animals empower a connection and imagination about Topsy’s life as an individual sentient being. Accordingly, humans are referred to as human animals and animals as nonhuman animals, and as subjects, not objects.2

The once prevailing view of René Descartes (1596–1650) that nonhuman animals are machine-like, devoid of self-intentions or self-drive is no longer generally held to be true.3 Charles Darwin (1809–1882) recognised that the difference between “man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind.”4 In 2012, a prominent group of scientists released the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, which formally acknowledges that nonhuman animals possess “the neurological substrates that generate consciousness.”5 This emerging awareness of nonhuman animal sentience is welcomed as it encourages more enlightened relationships between human animals and nonhuman animals. But this sensibility to nonhuman animal sentience challenges our relationship with them. Historian Keith Thomas saw the relationship between human animals and nonhuman animals as a “mixture of compromise and concealment.”6 The sleights of hands and tricks of minds that hide and sustain the institutional use and commercial exploitation of nonhuman animals to manufacture products and services for our consumption are increasingly revealed as speciesism.7 Psychologist Richard D. Ryder first used the word speciesism to “Describe the widespread discrimination that is practised by man against the other species, and to draw a parallel between it and racism.”8

2 Dunayer, Animal Equality, 182.
3 Regan and Singer, Animal Rights, 60–66.
4 Ibid., 72–81.
5 Frederick Crick Memorial Conference.
6 Thomas, Man, 303.
7 Hawthorne, Hearts.
8 Ryder, Victims, 16.
In short, we use nonhuman animals because we can. We have power and control over them. But the growing recognition of nonhuman animal sentience forces us to learn a new understanding about nonhuman animals and reorder our relationship with them. Their lives are as important to them as ours are to us. They, like us, live lives rich in emotional, psychological, and behavioural experiences. To deny them the right to have their lives written as enlightened biographies is to refuse to recognise their existence as individual sentient beings. To write Topsy’s biography is to narrate her life as a subject of a life. In The Case for Animal Rights, Tom Regan defines a subject of a life as a human or nonhuman animal or human animal who has beliefs and desires; perception, memory, and a sense of the future, including their own future; an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain; preference- and welfare-interests; the ability to initiate action in pursuit of their desires and goals; a psychological identity over time; and an individual welfare in the sense that their experiential life fares well or ill for them, logically independently of their utility for others and logically independently of their being the object of anyone else’s interests.

From what we know about her life and death, and what we know from contemporary research into the complex emotional, psychological, and behavioural lives of elephants, Topsy was undeniably a subject of a life—and, consequently, could be murdered.

LIFE

The elephant known as Topsy was born in Southeast Asia—India, Sri Lanka, Indochina, or Indonesia—in about 1875. She was probably captured with her mother in a keddah. Frank Buck, who captured nonhuman animals living in the wild and sold them to circuses and zoos in the 1930s, described a keddah as “an area of several acres that comprised the main keddah. Connecting with this, by means of a gate, was a smaller corral.”

Elephants were forced to enter the keddah by a “demonic hullabaloo” made by “hundreds of natives” who in a “final assault on the ears of the all-but-trapped pachyderms, tin-pans, guns, lungs and what not were

10Regan, Case, 243.
called upon for a last epic outburst designed to stampede the frantic beasts through the opening of the great prison.”

Today we know elephants to be intelligent, social animals with complex emotional, psychological, and behavioural needs. Adult elephants both nurture their young ones and care for their sick and elderly. Baby elephants suckle up to 3 years of age and reach sexual maturity at 9–15 years of age. They can live up to 60 years or more and grow up to 10 feet high at the shoulder weighing 2.25 to 5.5 tons. They eat as much as 300 pounds of food a day, which requires walking about 10 miles a day. Elephants in a herd will defend themselves against predators, including human animals and nonhuman animals. Elephants acknowledge death and pay respects to the dead. They communicate over great distances and recognise themselves in mirrors. Each has his or her own individual personality. Their matriarchal society prospers under the tutelage and leadership of elder elephants.

But this was a life denied to this baby elephant.

Most likely Topsy witnessed the murder of her mother when she was captured and taken from her family. It was—and still is—customary for hunters and poachers to kill mothers to capture their babies. She was abducted and held hostage as she was shipped thousands of miles from Southeast Asia across land and sea to the USA via Germany, a journey that took four to six months. She travelled as cargo, chained in place, in the dark holds of merchant ships and goods wagons pulled by steam trains.

Young Topsy was sold by Carl Hagenbeck, the international wildlife dealer based in Hamburg, Germany. His clients included America’s leading circus impresarios and arch rivals: P. T. Barnum and Adam Forepaugh. Both had bought elephants and other nonhuman animals caught from the wild from Hagenbeck for their circuses. Her arrival in America coincided with the country celebrating its centenary in 1876. Barnum opened his show with a 13-cannon salute—one each for the original colonies. Forepaugh called his circus the Great Centennial Show. Moreover, Forepaugh knew that for the young country, which at that time was welcoming thousands of immigrants from Europe, having the first American-born elephant would resonate with the celebration of independence,

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12 Ibid., 205.
14 Hagenbeck, Beasts. Rothfels, Savages.
15 Daly, Topsy, 12.
national pride, and pioneering spirit. To be among the first American-born is to be part of America’s exceptionalism—even if you are an elephant and a nonnative species.

But Forepaugh did not have the first American-born elephant, although he had already imported wild-caught young elephants since launching his circus in 1867. He did have a baby Asian elephant who arrived in New York during the winter of 1876. Unlike previous elephants and other wild-caught animals whose arrivals in the USA were greeted with much public celebration and press attention, this baby elephant was discreetly unloaded in New York and secretly brought to Forepaugh’s winter quarters in Philadelphia. This furtive behaviour, Forepaugh assumed, would help him to pull off a major publicity stunt. In February 1877, he announced to have the first elephant born in the USA, a male who stood 18 inches high.16 But Barnum suspected Forepaugh was lying and had bought the baby Asian elephant from Hagenbeck. So Barnum issued a public challenge. “It is an established zoological fact that elephants do not breed in captivity,” he claimed. Maybe Forepaugh suspected Barnum had found out the truth about the baby Asian elephant. Or maybe Barnum was simply calling Forepaugh’s bluff. Regardless, Forepaugh quietly withdrew his first American-born claim.17

When she was born, she weighed about 200 pounds and stood about 3 feet tall. She consumed as much as three gallons of milk a day and increased her weight by as much as 30 pounds a week.18 Upon her death in 1903, she was 10 feet high and almost 20 feet long from trunk to tail. Her quick growth most likely inspired her name. In Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel, _Uncle Tom’s Cabin_, Miss Ophelia asks the young slave Topsy, “Do you know who made you?” “Nobody, as I knows on,” she replies. “I spect I grow’d. Don’t think nobody never made me.” It is not unreasonable to speculate that the book’s popularity and her “I spect I grow’d” comeback inspired the figure of speech to “grow like Topsy.”

Life for elephants in American circuses in the late 1800s was not that much different from how they live today. Topsy was held captive and lived a peripatetic life, travelling on foot and by train across the USA. She was shackled and restrained in rail cars as she was shipped around the country. Prolonged periods of chained boredom were alleviated only by short peri-

16 Ibid., 14.
17 Ibid., 16.
18 Ibid., 5.
odds of intense activity when she was moved, trained, or performed. She was provoked by men whose machismo behaviour was emboldened by alcohol. She was beaten to behave in ways that had no meaning to her, but this ensured the paying audience was entertained by the silly tricks. Elephants do not, of course, perform in the wild. They have to be trained. This can be done with positive reinforcement, including praise and reward, or with blows and jabs from a bullhook, a metal pole with a hook and sharp point at one end. Topsy had a series of trainers throughout her life. The first were Forepaugh’s son, Addie Forepaugh, who abused her, and Moses “Eph” Thompson, a young African-American man who treated her more kindly.

In 1900 when she was touring with the Forepaugh & Sells Brothers Circus in Texas, Topsy allegedly killed one keeper in Waco and another in Paris. Then, in 1902, she was involved with two fateful incidents. First, James Fielding Blount, a drunkard, attached himself to the Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus. One day, he teased the resting and sleeping elephants, with a glass of whiskey in one hand and a cigar in another. When he reached Topsy, his glass was empty but he still teased her with it. Elephants learned to associate the smell of alcohol and the sight of the bullhook with threatening behaviour from men. Blount threw sand in her face because she did not pay him any attention. Then he stabbed his lit cigar into her extremely sensitive trunk. This was too much for Topsy; she wrapped her trunk around his waist, held him up high in the air and threw him to the ground, crushing him to death with her body.

The second incident occurred some days later. Elephants were being unloaded from a train and were waiting to walk to the next location. Topsy was approached by Louis Dodero, a local young man, who used a stick against her. She seized him around the waist, hoisted him into the air and threw him to the ground. She raised her right foot to crush him but was stopped by a circus worker; Dodero survived. But the sequence of events that led to Topsy’s murder had been set in motion. The Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus knew that they could no longer keep Topsy. Later

19 The bullhook is banned in California and Rhode Island, see Pacelle, “Ringling Announcement.”
20 Nance, Elephants, 184. Daly challenges Topsy killed two keepers in Texas. He refers to one keeper in Paris being attacked by Topsy and the one in Waco as a “fabrication” (Daly, Topsy, 282.) He could not find any mention of the incident in town records or local newspapers.
that day, they announced she had been sold and become the property of Frederick Thompson and Elmer “Skip” Dundy.

At the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, Thompson and Dundy operated a virtual ride called a “Trip to the Moon,” which featured an airship called Luna. In late 1902, they were establishing Luna Park on Coney Island. Thompson and Dundy bought Topsy and assigned a handyman, Frederick “Whitey” Ault to be her trainer. Ault, a drunkard, abused Topsy as she was forced to drag the popular “Trip to the Moon” ride along the boardwalk to its new location and help build Luna Park. Ault was arrested twice for beating Topsy but there is no evidence of any significant penalty.

Thompson and Dundy realised that, with Luna Park’s opening only months away, they had to maintain positive relationships with residents, police, and the press. This meant they had to resolve the related problems of Ault and Topsy, who would follow only Ault’s instructions. Thompson and Dundy knew they could fire Ault. But what about Topsy?

DEATH

Although far from being an everyday occurrence from the mid-1800s to mid-1900s, elephants were killed by circuses and zoos when they were deemed to be uncontrollable and dangerous. Elephants were poisoned, shot, strangled, and hanged. As every elephant trainer knew, you could take a wild animal out of the wild and believe you can tame them. But you cannot take the wild out of a wild animal and make them tame. In his memoir *I Loved Rogues*, George “Slim” Lewis, the circus and zoo elephant trainer, wrote: “Dozens of elephants, most of them males, have been executed in the past twenty years because of a killing or simply because they were periodically unmanageable. Black Diamond, Major, Romano, Joe, Sammy and Teddy are only a few given death sentences for running away or attacking somebody.” Historian Susan Nance describes several incidents involving the deaths of elephants who performed in circuses in America. Nance chronicles elephant mortality involving accidents (e.g., drowning, electrocution, train accidents, and collisions) and the murder of elephants who went rogue—the term used to describe “bad” elephants. “Bad” behaviour was caused by inadequate healthcare (e.g., inappropriate diets, insufficient care

for their feet and teeth, lack of socialisation with other elephants), cruel training techniques, aggressive provocation by elephant trainers and the public, accidents, and musth (a hormone-fuelled period in male elephants that can cause a dramatic increase in aggression). For example, Mary, a five-ton Asian elephant, who performed with the Sparks World Famous Shows circus, was hanged in Erwin, Tennessee, in 1916 after killing a trainer and becoming known as “Murderous Mary.” Black Diamond, a nine-ton Asian elephant who performed with the Al G. Barnes Circus, injured his long-time former trainer and killed his current employer in Texas in 1929. A firing squad killed him with 50–100 shots. In 1994, an African elephant named Tyke who performed with Circus International killed her trainer and trampled her groomer during a performance in Honolulu, Hawaii. After she charged out of the ring into the nearby streets, local police officers fired 87 shots to kill her.

Perhaps the most celebrated elephant ever, Jumbo, who was bought by P. T. Barnum from the London Zoo and brought to the USA in 1882, was killed in 1885 after being hit by a freight train in St. Thomas, Ontario. Unlike Mary, Black Diamond, and Tyke, Jumbo’s death was an accident and not from going “rogue.” Nonetheless, the impression is made that circus proprietors and elephant trainers treated elephants, who were valuable income-generating assets, with neglect and callous indifference to their welfare and safety needs. Lewis noted in *I Loved Rogues* that

When the victim is a spectator or a zoo keeper, the elephant usually pays with his own life these days, and in recent years, even the circuses have become touchy about elephants killing people. It used to be cheaper to hire another handler than it was to buy an expensive elephant, and if it was only a circus roustabout who got it, the incident was hushed up.  

As for Topsy, we know more about how her life ended than how it began. She first was considered a liability after she reportedly killed two people in separate incidents Texas. But such allegations were often forgotten by circus proprietors, who were known to give elephants with bad reputations new names to hide their dangerous past.

Topsy’s liability returned when she killed Blount and attacked Dodero in 1902. She was also a problem because she would only follow instructions from Ault, whom Thompson and Dundy found difficult to super-

23 Lewis and Fish, *Rogues*, 4.
vise. In its story about Topsy’s electrocution, *The New York Times* reported that Ault had a “habit of taking more stimulant than was good for him, and on these frequent occasions it was hard telling what he would do with Topsy.”

Topsy was then in her mid-twenties and an adult elephant with strength and intelligence, and capable of single-minded determination to get whatever she wanted. Having been denied a natural existence in the wild, she was forced to cope in an alien society, deprived of any nurturing from her own kind to help her learn how to behave. She was not a dangerous animal when left alone, but became one when she was provoked. She defended herself in the only way she knew.

*The New York Times* explained why Thompson and Dundy finally made the fateful decision for Topsy:

The beginning of the end was on Oct. 30, [1902] when “Whitey” proceeded to conduct Topsy on a tour of Coney Island, and wound up in the police station, with Topsy trying to get her fat head in through the door with doubtful success. From that time until Friday of last week “Whitey” was kept in control, and consequently Topsy behaved herself, very dutifully pushing around big beams which were being used in construction at Luna Park, and hauling loads too heavy for ordinary beasts of burden. But last Friday “Whitey” decided that such work was too degrading, and Topsy agreed with him. So he led her out of her stable on the grounds, and after the elephant language told her to “Sick ’em”, the “’em” being a force of Italian workmen, who promptly took to the tall timber being used in the construction of electric towers and other such things. It was so little time before “Whitey” was persuaded, partially by threats and partially by force, to call his elephant, and from that time Topsy’s life was doomed.

Thompson and Dundy fired Ault and decided to kill Topsy, which they wanted to use as an opportunity to attract maximum attention to Luna Park’s opening. But how to kill Topsy? Shooting her was not an option; it was impossible to find an elephant gun in the USA. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals stopped them from hanging her, partly because they were concerned with it becoming a public spectacle. But the ASPCA could not prevent her from being killed by other means. It was also agreed that only invited people could attend Topsy’s execution.

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24 Anon., “Coney Elephant.”
25 Ibid.
An audience of at least 800 onlookers and 100 photographers witnessed Topsy’s murder.

On the day of her execution on January 4, 1903, Topsy was fed carrots laced with 460 grams of potassium cyanide, which appeared to have no effect. Then she was electrocuted with 6600 volts of electricity for 10 seconds, which killed her. *The New York Times* reported:

At 2:45 the signal was given, and Sharkey [of the Edison Company] turned on the current. There was a bit of smoke for an instant. Topsy raised her trunk as if to protest, then shook, bent to her knees, fell, and rolled over on her right side motionless. All this took a matter of ten seconds. There had been no sound and hardly a conscious movement of the body, outside the raising of the trunk when the current was first felt. In two minutes from the time of turning on the current [veterinarian] Dr. Brotheridge pronounced Topsy dead.26

Topsy was electrocuted because she was typecast as a villain in a much larger drama playing itself out on the human-animal stage. Yes, she killed people, but she also became collateral damage in the so-called War of Currents, a battle fought for about 10 years in the late 1880s between Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse.27 They each wanted the electricity that their companies generated to fuel America’s growing industrial empire. Edison wanted direct current (DC) and Westinghouse lobbed for alternating current (AC). In 1887, in an attempt to discredit Westinghouse and his preference for alternating current, Edison electrocuted 44 dogs, two calves and one horse to prove AC was more dangerous than DC. The press were invited to watch these experiments. Even though he opposed capital punishment, Edison also secretly paid for the first electric chair to be built for the State of New York to demonstrate that AC was deadlier than DC. He believed if he could show the danger of AC, only then he would be able to win the War of Currents and empower Americans with DC.

Thompson and Dundy were entrepreneurs in America’s emerging industrial empire and producer of films and entertainment. They wanted to capitalise on Topsy’s death to attract publicity to Luna Park and its forthcoming opening as a public attraction. They recalled their time at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901, the first event of its kind to

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26 Ibid.
make full use of electricity, including electric lighting. The expo even advertised the electrocution of an elephant named Jumbo II, but that killing never took place. The Buffalo expo occurred in 1901 after the War of Currents had ended, but they both cast long shadows over Topsy’s electrocution. Ironically, by 1901, both Edison and Westinghouse had lost control of their business empires, and alternating current had become the way in which electricity was delivered throughout the USA. The War of Currents is sometimes cited as the reason why electrocution was chosen as the method for Topsy’s killing. Edison reportedly wanted to show that AC was so dangerous that it could even kill an elephant. As a result, Topsy’s death was filmed by The Edison Moving Picture Company and called “Electrocuting an Elephant.” Edison was neither present at Topsy’s electrocution nor did he own the film company, but the association of his name fed the belief that the gruesome event was associated with him and the War of Currents.

“Electrocuting an Elephant” subsequently became important footage in the history of film-making. It was recorded for posterity and came to symbolise America’s global presence as an industrial empire and producer of films and entertainment. Further, the film captured the power and control human animals had over nonhuman animals and the natural world. Anat Pick wrote that “Electrocuting an Elephant could be declared the ‘ground zero’ of animal cinema. It combines the prowess of the cinematic apparatus, the ambivalence of electricity as an animating and lethal agent, and the spectacle of the vulnerable animal body that arouses both compassion and cruelty.”

Forty years later another “dramatic” film featuring an elephant performing in a circus became popular and the most financially successful Disney film of the 1940s. While Topsy’s biography ended in her death, the life of fictional Dumbo, beginning with his fanciful entrance as a baby elephant with unusually large ears and delivered by a stork, is a success story in which he is celebrated for being a star in the circus ring. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth about the life of elephants in circuses. Nonetheless, Walt Disney’s “Dumbo” has its moments of animal rights insight. For example, Dumbo’s mother, Mrs. Jumbo, loses her temper when she sees boys torment her son. She is incarcerated for being “mad” when she was only protecting him, caregiving behaviour that we credit elephants for today based on field studies of the wild populations.
from which individuals like Topsy were once taken. Even in Disney films, where the deaths of maternal characters are common, it is some comfort that Mrs. Jumbo’s fate for acting “rogue” was not as dire as Topsy’s.

CONCLUSION

Thompson and Dundy made the decision to kill Topsy because she was a “big, man-killing elephant.”

They no longer had power and control over her and her trainer; they saw no choice but to kill her and fire him. The latter was easy, but the former was slightly more difficult. But to read her biography simply as Topsy the elephant who was electrocuted to death because she went “rogue” is to tell an unfinished story.

Topsy’s alleged crime was to be a “killer,” for which she was sentenced to death. Even though she attacked and killed, I believe she was innocent of being a “big, man-killing elephant.” Topsy’s true crime—if indeed it was an offence—was simply to be an elephant. To be more precise, it was to be guilty of being a wild-caught elephant held captive in an unsuitable environment. Why should we be shocked when elephants like Topsy kill people? They are traumatised by the murder of their own kind, including quite possibly either or both of their parents, when they are captured.

They are deprived of the close companionship of their own relations and extended family who live in close-knit matriarchies. They are hijacked and held hostage against their will. They are confined and transported across land and sea to new continents whose native fauna is unlike anything they or their ancestors are familiar with. They are beaten until they behave in ways meaningless to them. They survive in an existence that prevents them from fulfilling their emotional, psychological, and behavioural needs. Indeed, we should be surprised that they do not attack and kill more often.

To be found guilty and sentenced to death is not that unusual for nonhuman animals, of course. E. P. Evans’s *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals* describes more than 500 years of nonhuman animals being tried and found guilty and sentenced to death. In addition, millions of nonhuman animals are routinely killed to manufacture products and services for the consumption of human animals. Whether it is for products or productions, we use nonhuman animals because we can.

“The day may come,” noted Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), “when the

29 Anon., “Coney Elephant.”
30 Evans, *Criminal Prosecution.*
rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withheld from them but by the hand of tyranny.”

Again, we should be surprised that nonhuman animals do not rebel against their oppressors more often. Perhaps they are, and we are only beginning to notice the “animal resistance” that Jason Hribal describes in *Fear of the Animal Planet*: “Captive animals escaped their cages. They attacked their keepers. They demanded more food. They refused to perform. They refused to reproduce. The resistance itself could be organised. Indeed, not only did the animals have a history, they were making history. For their resistance led directly to historical change.” To acknowledge “animal resistance” is to recognise the subjectivity of the lives of nonhuman animals. When Forepaugh named the baby elephant Topsy, he authorised people to view her as an individual nonhuman animal (“subject of a life”), but it was also with the understanding that in doing so it licensed human power and control over her. Topsy had no power and control over her own life except when she acted in her own defence. Ironically, her self-defence became the reason why those who had power and control over her were empowered to end her life as a “rogue” elephant.

Writing this biography of Topsy as the subject of her own life is intended to make some amends to her and return some power and control back to her—for her own life to be recognised as the subject of a life. This begs the question: Who speaks for Topsy? Certainly, not anyone who had power and control over her life or any economic or political gains to be made from her exploitation. In restitution of her tragic life and gruesome death, this biography seeks to make amends for past injustices and prevent their reoccurrence. Whomever is recognised as speaking for Topsy has power over her. But the power in this biography is not for any material gain on the author’s part; it is the commitment to restorative justice and a sense of duty for her life should not have been so wasted.

Topsy, of course, never asked to be captured. Or to be forcefully relocated to another continent. Or to be kept by people who did not understand her needs. She never asked to be beaten or abused in the mistaken belief that doing so would give her keepers power and control over her. And yet, this was her fate. Topsy killed out of fear and retaliation. And she paid for it dramatically with her life. In 1903, awareness about elephants and their psychological and behavioural needs was not as evolved as it is.

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today. There were no elephant sanctuaries that could have sheltered Topsy for the remainder of her life. She was doomed to die, as were many other elephants in circuses and the entertainment industry. It would be reassuring to believe that the poisoning and electrocution of elephants no longer happens, but this is the not the case. Ivory poachers commonly use poisoning to kill elephants, such as when more than 80 elephants died after poachers used cyanide to poison a water hole in Zimbabwe’s Hwange National Park in September 2013.33 The London-based NGO, Elephant Family, reports scores of endangered Asian elephants are accidentally electrocuted and killed by low-hanging power lines each year in India.34

There is today reason to hope that the era of using elephants in circuses is waning. The decision by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, the biggest circus in the USA, to discontinue its use of performing elephants reflects a major shift in how these animals are viewed philosophically and used commercially.35 Elephant sanctuaries around the world continue to promote the well-being of animals previously held captive in zoos and circuses, and work to relieve their exploitation. For Topsy, all of that came more than a century too late. Expediency and spectacle conspired with power and profit to make her life, and her death, a tragedy. But perhaps her biography will serve not just as documentation of archaic animal cruelty, but more importantly a recognition that what she suffered will no longer be tolerated by civilised society.

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