

Metadata of the chapter that will be visualized online

Chapter Title	Topsy: The Elephant We Must Never Forget	
Copyright Year	2018	
Copyright Holder	The Author(s)	
Corresponding Author	Family Name	Stallwood
	Particle	
	Given Name	Kim
	Suffix	
	Division	
	Organization/University	Independent Scholar
Address	Hastings, UK	
Abstract	<p>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. Q1</p>	
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.

Topsy: The Elephant We Must Never Forget 2*Kim Stallwood* 3

INTRODUCTION 4

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

© The Author(s) 2018
A. Krebber, M. Roscher (eds.), *Animal Biography*,
Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98288-5_12

20 elephant traders and trainers, regarding key moments in her life; informa-
21 tion about other elephants who also lived in zoos and circuses during that
22 period; and current research regarding the sentience of elephants living in
23 the wild and in captivity that also yield insight into their thoughts and
24 emotions. Topsy's life mattered to her, and her biography deserves to be
25 known. The function of a biography is to make the subject visible by
26 recovering and reconstructing the life of an individual, regardless of spe-
27 cies. Empowered with this enlightened perspective, the false claims of
28 anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism in writing the biography of
29 nonhuman animals are rejected. Empathy and compassion for nonhuman
30 animals empower a connection and imagination about Topsy's life as an
31 individual sentient being. Accordingly, humans are referred to as human
32 animals and animals as nonhuman animals, and as subjects, not objects.²

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

²Dunayer, *Animal Equality*, 182.

³Regan and Singer, *Animal Rights*, 60–66.

⁴Ibid., 72–81.

⁵Frederick Crick Memorial Conference.

⁶Thomas, *Man*, 303.

⁷Hawthorne, *Hearts*.

⁸Ryder, *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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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 74

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.”¹¹ 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

⁹ Balcombe, *Second Nature*. Bekoff, *Emotional Lives*.

¹⁰ Regan, *Case*, 243.

¹¹ Buck and Anthony, *Back Alive*, 202.

84 called upon for a last epic outburst designed to stampede the frantic beasts
85 through the opening of the great prison.”¹²

86 Today we know elephants to be intelligent, social animals with complex
87 emotional, psychological, and behavioural needs.¹³ Adult elephants both
88 nurture their young ones and care for their sick and elderly. Baby elephants
89 suckle up to 3 years of age and reach sexual maturity at 9–15 years of age.
90 They can live up to 60 years or more and grow up to 10 feet high at the
91 shoulder weighing 2.25 to 5.5 tons. They eat as much as 300 pounds of
92 food a day, which requires walking about 10 miles a day. Elephants in a
93 herd will defend themselves against predators, including human animals
94 and nonhuman animals. Elephants acknowledge death and pay respects to
95 the dead. They communicate over great distances and recognise them-
96 selves in mirrors. Each has his or her own individual personality. Their
97 matriarchal society prospers under the tutelage and leadership of elder
98 elephants.

99 But this was a life denied to this baby elephant.

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

107 Young Topsy was sold by Carl Hagenbeck, the international wildlife
108 dealer based in Hamburg, Germany. His clients included America’s lead-
109 ing circus impresarios and arch rivals: P. T. Barnum and Adam Forepaugh.
110 Both had bought elephants and other nonhuman animals caught from the
111 wild from Hagenbeck for their circuses.¹⁴ Her arrival in America coincided
112 with the country celebrating its centenary in 1876. Barnum opened his
113 show with a 13-cannon salute—one each for the original colonies.
114 Forepaugh called his circus the Great Centennial Show.¹⁵ Moreover,
115 Forepaugh knew that for the young country, which at that time was wel-
116 coming thousands of immigrants from Europe, having the first American-
117 born elephant would resonate with the celebration of independence,

¹² Ibid., 205.

¹³ Moss, *Memoires*. Payne, *Thunder*. Sukumar, *Elephants*.

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.

153 ods of intense activity when she was moved, trained, or performed. She
154 was provoked by men whose machismo behaviour was emboldened by
155 alcohol. She was beaten to behave in ways that had no meaning to her, but
156 this ensured the paying audience was entertained by the silly tricks.
157 Elephants do not, of course, perform in the wild. They have to be trained.
158 This can be done with positive reinforcement, including praise and reward,
159 or with blows and jabs from a bullhook,¹⁹ a metal pole with a hook and
160 sharp point at one end. Topsy had a series of trainers throughout her life.
161 The first were Forepaugh's son, Addie Forepaugh, who abused her, and
162 Moses "Eph" Thompson, a young African-American man who treated her
163 more kindly.

164 In 1900 when she was touring with the Forepaugh & Sells Brothers
165 Circus in Texas, Topsy allegedly killed one keeper in Waco and another in
166 Paris.²⁰ Then, in 1902, she was involved with two fateful incidents. First,
167 James Fielding Blount, a drunkard, attached himself to the Forepaugh and
168 Sells Brothers Circus. One day, he teased the resting and sleeping ele-
169 phants, with a glass of whiskey in one hand and a cigar in another. When
170 he reached Topsy, his glass was empty but he still teased her with it.
171 Elephants learned to associate the smell of alcohol and the sight of the
172 bullhook with threatening behaviour from men. Blount threw sand in her
173 face because she did not pay him any attention. Then he stabbed his lit
174 cigar into her extremely sensitive trunk. This was too much for Topsy; she
175 wrapped her trunk around his waist, held him up high in the air and threw
176 him to the ground, crushing him to death with her body.

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

¹⁹The bullhook is banned in California and Rhode Island, see Pacelle, "Ringling Announcement."

²⁰Nance, *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. 185
186

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. 187
188
189
190
191
192
193
194
195

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? 196
197
198
199
200

DEATH 201

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.”²¹ Historian Susan Nance describes several incidents involving the deaths of elephants who performed in circuses in America.²² 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 202
203
204
205
206
207
208
209
210
211
212
213
214
215
216
217
218

²¹ Lewis and Fish, *Rogues*, 6.

²² Nance, *Elephants*, 108–113.

K. STALLWOOD

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

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

241 When the victim is a spectator or a zoo keeper, the elephant usually pays
242 with his own life these days, and in recent years, even the circuses have
243 become touchy about elephants killing people. It used to be cheaper to hire
244 another handler than it was to buy an expensive elephant, and if it was only
245 a circus roustabout who got it, the incident was hushed up.²³

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

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

²³ Lewis and Fish, *Rogues*, 4.

wise. 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."²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.

²⁴ Anon., "Coney Elephant."

²⁵ Ibid.

K. STALLWOOD

288 An audience of at least 800 onlookers and 100 photographers witnessed
289 Topsy's murder.

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

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

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

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

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Essig, *Edison*. Stross, *Wizard*.

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."²⁸

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

²⁸ Pick, "Sparks," 106.

360 from which individuals like Topsy were once taken. Even in Disney films,
361 where the deaths of maternal characters are common, it is some comfort
362 that Mrs. Jumbo's fate for acting "rogue" was not as dire as Topsy's.

363

CONCLUSION

364 Thompson and Dundy made the decision to kill Topsy because she was a
365 "big, man-killing elephant."²⁹ They no longer had power and control over
366 her and her trainer; they saw no choice but to kill her and fire him. The
367 latter was easy, but the former was slightly more difficult. But to read her
368 biography simply as Topsy the elephant who was electrocuted to death
369 because she went "rogue" is to tell an unfinished story.

370 Topsy's alleged crime was to be a "killer," for which she was sentenced
371 to death. Even though she attacked and killed, I believe she was innocent
372 of being a "big, man-killing elephant." Topsy's true crime—if indeed it
373 was an offence—was simply to be an elephant. To be more precise, it was
374 to be guilty of being a wild-caught elephant held captive in an unsuitable
375 environment. Why should we be shocked when elephants like Topsy kill
376 people? They are traumatised by the murder of their own kind, including
377 quite possibly either or both of their parents, when they are captured.
378 They are deprived of the close companionship of their own relations and
379 extended family who live in close-knit matriarchies. They are hijacked and
380 held hostage against their will. They are confined and transported across
381 land and sea to new continents whose native fauna is unlike anything they
382 or their ancestors are familiar with. They are beaten until they behave in
383 ways meaningless to them. They survive in an existence that prevents them
384 from fulfilling their emotional, psychological, and behavioural needs.
385 Indeed, we should be surprised that they do not attack and kill more often.

386 To be found guilty and sentenced to death is not that unusual for non-
387 human animals, of course. E. P. Evans's *The Criminal Prosecution and*
388 *Capital Punishment of Animals* describes more than 500 years of nonhu-
389 man animals being tried and found guilty and sentenced to death.³⁰ In
390 addition, millions of nonhuman animals are routinely killed to manufacture
391 products and services for the consumption of human animals. Whether it
392 is for products or productions, we use nonhuman animals because we can.
393 "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 394
have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny.”³¹ Again, we 395
should be surprised that nonhuman animals do not rebel against their 396
oppressors more often. Perhaps they are, and we are only beginning to 397
notice the “animal resistance” that Jason Hribal describes in *Fear of the* 398
Animal Planet. “Captive animals escaped their cages. They attacked their 399
keepers. They demanded more food. They refused to perform. They 400
refused to reproduce. The resistance itself could be organised. Indeed, not 401
only did the animals have a history, they were making history. For their 402
resistance led directly to historical change.”³² To acknowledge “animal 403
resistance” is to recognise the subjectivity of the lives of nonhuman ani- 404
mals. When Forepaugh named the baby elephant Topsy, he authorised 405
people to view her as an individual nonhuman animal (“subject of a life”), 406
but it was also with the understanding that in doing so it licensed human 407
power and control over her. Topsy had no power and control over her 408
own life except when she acted in her own defence. Ironically, her self- 409
defence became the reason why those who had power and control over her 410
were empowered to end her life as a “rogue” elephant. 411

Writing this biography of Topsy as the subject of her own life is intended 412
to make some amends to her and return some power and control back to 413
her—for her own life to be recognised as the subject of a life. This begs the 414
question: Who speaks for Topsy? Certainly, not anyone who had power 415
and control over her life or any economic or political gains to be made 416
from her exploitation. In restitution of her tragic life and gruesome death, 417
this biography seeks to make amends for past injustices and prevent their 418
reoccurrence. Whomever is recognised as speaking for Topsy has power 419
over her. But the power in this biography is not for any material gain on 420
the author’s part; it is the commitment to restorative justice and a sense of 421
duty for her life should not have been so wasted. 422

Topsy, of course, never asked to be captured. Or to be forcefully relo- 423
cated to another continent. Or to be kept by people who did not under- 424
stand her needs. She never asked to be beaten or abused in the mistaken 425
belief that doing so would give her keepers power and control over her. 426
And yet, this was her fate. Topsy killed out of fear and retaliation. And she 427
paid for it dramatically with her life. In 1903, awareness about elephants 428
and their psychological and behavioural needs was not as evolved as it is 429

³¹ Regan and Singer, *Animal Rights*, 130.

³² Hribal, *Fear*, 29–30.

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

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

452 **Acknowledgements** The author wishes to express his appreciation for advice and
453 professional assistance from Jill Howard Church in the writing of this paper.

454 WORKS CITED

- 455 Anonymous. "Coney Elephant Killed: Topsy Overcome with Cyanide of Potassium
456 and Electricity." *The New York Times*, January 5, 1903.
457 ———. "Zimbabwe's Elephants Poisoned by Cyanide." *BBC News*, September
458 25, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-24234927>. Accessed
459 September 30, 2017.
460 Balcombe, Jonathan. *Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals*. New York:
461 Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

³³ Anon., "Zimbabwe's Elephants."

³⁴ Elephanfamily.org, "Elephant Electrocution."

³⁵ Maslin and Schweber, "Ringling Brothers."

- Bekoff, Marc. *The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow, and Empathy – and Why They Matter*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2007. 462
463
464
- Buck, Frank and Edward Anthony. *Bring 'Em Back Alive*. New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1930. 465
466
- Daly, Michael. *Topsy*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013. 467
- Dunayer, Joan. *Animal Equality: Language and Liberation*. Derwood, MD: Ryce Publishing, 2001. 468
469
- Elephantfamily.org. “Elephant Electrocution.” <http://www.elephantfamily.org/what-we-do/campaigns/elephant-electrocution/>. Accessed September 30, 2013. 470
471
472
- Essig, M. *Edison and the Electric Chair*. Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2003. 473
- Evans, E. P. *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987. 474
475
- Frederick Crick Memorial Conference. Cambridge, UK, July 7, 2012. <http://fcmconference.org>. Accessed September 23, 2017. 476
477
- Hagenbeck, Carl. *Beasts and Men: Being Carl Hagenbeck's Experiences for Half a Century Among Wild Animals*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909. 478
479
- Hawthorne, Mark. *Bleating Hearts: The Hidden World of Animal Suffering*. Winchester, UK: Changemakers Books, 2013. 480
481
- Hribal, Jason. *Fear of the Animal Planet: The Hidden History of Animal Resistance*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2010. 482
483
- Lewis, George “Slim” and Byron Fish. *I Loved Rogues: The Life of an Elephant Tramp*. Seattle, WA: Superior Publishing Company, 1978. 484
485
- Maslin, Sarah and Nate Schweber. “After 146 Years, Ringling Brothers Circus Takes Its Final Bow.” *The New York Times*, May 21, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/21/nyregion/ringling-brothers-circus-takes-final-bow.html>. Accessed September 30, 2017. 486
487
488
489
- Mathiesen, Karl. “Elephants on the Path to Extinction – The Facts.” *The Guardian*, August 12, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/12/elephants-on-the-path-to-extinction-the-facts>. Accessed September 23, 2017. 490
491
492
493
- Moss, Cynthia. *Elephant Memories: Thirteen Years in the Life of an Elephant Family*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 494
495
- Nance, Susan. *Entertaining Elephants*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 496
497
- Pacelle, Wayne. “Ringling Announcement an Indicator of Broader Shift Toward Animal Protection.” http://blog.humanesociety.org/wayne/2017/01/ringling-bros-shuts-circus-animal-acts.html?credit=blog_post_020817_id8772. Last modified January 16, 2017. Accessed September 23, 2017. 498
499
500
501
- Payne, Katy. *Silent Thunder: The Hidden Voice of Elephants*. London: Phoenix, 1998. 502
503

K. STALLWOOD

- 504 Pick, Anat. "Sparks Would Fly: Electricity and the Spectacle of Animality." In
505 *Animalities: Literary and Cultural Studies Beyond the Human*, edited by
506 Michael Lundblad, 106. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
507 Regan, Tom. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley, CA: University of California
508 Press, 1983.
509 Regan, Tom and Peter Singer, ed. *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*.
510 Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976.
511 Rothfels, Nigel. *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo*. Baltimore: The
512 Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.
513 Ryder, Richard D. *Victims of Science*. London: Davis-Poynter, 1975.
514 Stowe, H. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Originally published in 1852. London: Wordsworth
515 Classics, 2002.
516 Stross, R. *The Wizard of Menlo Park*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2007.
517 Sukumar, Roman. *The Living Elephants: Evolutionary Ecology, Behaviour and*
518 *Conservation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
519 Thomas, Keith. *Man and the Natural World*. London: Allen Lane, 1983.