

Beauty Secrets: Fight Fat: Black Women's Aesthetics, Exercise, and Fat Stigma, 1900-1930s.

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Abstract

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black female body at a time when thinness held new civic and political meaning. From the turn of the twentieth century, middle-class blacks began to reject fatness and encourage black women to slim down, beautify, and enhance their bodies through purposeful exercise. By examining this discussion of black anti-fat bias, this article seeks to challenge assumptions about black women's ideas of beauty, fat acceptance, and their relationship to weight.

"BEAUTY SECRETS: FIGHT FAT":

*Black Women's Aesthetics, Exercise, and Fat Stigma,
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In 1927, Madame Sara Washington, a black beauty columnist for the *New York Amsterdam News*, wrote an article titled, "Beauty Secrets: Fight Fat." The mere title alerted readers to the incongruous nature of fatness and beauty. In the article, Washington explained that exercise was fundamental to warding off "excess fat" and obtaining a beautiful body. She stated enthusiastically, "There is positively nothing that will aid beauty more than plenty of good exercise in the open."¹ With a thriving cosmetics industry in the late 1920s, it may appear unusual that Washington did not recommend make up, hair products, or the latest beauty trends in the market. More curiously, this advice seems atypical as the scholarship on black women's beauty culture is virtually silent about exercise. Washington, however, was among several beauty experts who recommended exercise to improve one's appearance. These women did not relegate black beauty culture to just the face, skin, and hair—they used physical culture to conceptualize beauty as it applied to the *entire* body.

Washington's comments place her within a longer tradition of black women's physical culture.² Starting in the late nineteenth century and tapering off with the Great Depression, white fitness enthusiasts, entrepreneurs, and health advocates spearheaded the modern physical culture movement that promoted health and beauty through calisthenics, gymnastics, sports,



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