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



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Abstract

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In the early twentieth century, Americans began to stigmatize fatness and engage in purposeful exercise in search of thinness, health, and beauty. Historians, however, have excluded black women from this story. This article considers the relationship between notions of beauty, fatness, black womanhood, and the physical culture movement—a white-led fitness campaign that took place between 1900 and the 1930s. It argues that middle-class black women used physical culture to promote their ideals of beauty and the slender

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, be autify, and enhance their bodies through purposeful exercise. By examining this discussion of black antifat 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":

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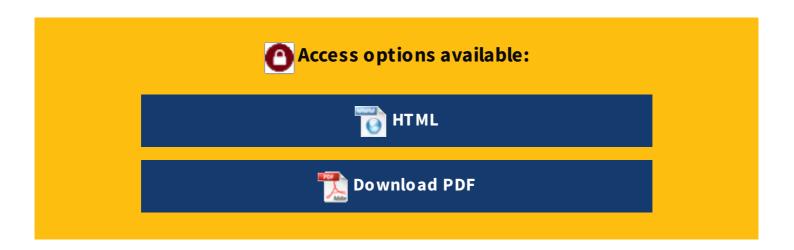
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In 1927, Madame Sara Washington, a black beauty columnist for the New York Amsterdam News, who te an article titled, "Beauty Secrets: Fight Fat." The mere title alerted readers to the incongruous nature of fatness and beauty. In the article, Washington 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." 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. Starting in the late nine teenth 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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