

Why some young Black Bostonians are choosing to move to the South

Some are returning to the states their ancestors were itching to leave. Others, without Southern roots, are planting their own seeds.

By [Tiana Woodard](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 5, 2022, 4:34 p.m.



Genevieve Bien-Aime, 36, a Cambridge native, on the rooftop space of her favorite Houston dining and entertainment spot, POST Houston. JOHNNY HANSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/JOHNNY HANSON

H OUSTON — Genevieve Bien-Aime perched on a barstool in a trendy international food hall here, surveying the lively crowd: Young Black people mingled with Latino, Asian, and white friends over after-work cocktails, sampling Mexican quesabirrias and Viet-Cajun crawfish.

“You’d never see this in Boston,” she said.

For six years, Bien-Aime, 36, ran a networking group called The Other Boston for young Black professionals, promoting open mics, bar nights, and weekly event lists. The [T-shirts](#) were a hit. Even Ayanna Pressley [bought one](#).

But it weighed on her, the endless scramble to build a more diverse social scene in Boston, the effort it took to find affordable venues and rally people to show up. She got tired of feeling constant pressure to advocate for her community — and tired, too, of her cramped yet pricey one-bedroom in Chelsea. It wasn’t the life she’d imagined for herself.

So last year Bien-Aime moved to Houston, where, she said in an earlier conversation, she feels like “a plant that’s been repotted in better soil.”

“In Boston, we’re so focused on being Black,” Bien-Aime said. “I want to exist, too.”

The idea that young Black up-and-comers might leave a liberal Northern city like Boston to settle in the South might have seemed unimaginable decades ago — outlandish to some even now. But for Bien-Aime and others, moving south feels like a step in the right direction, toward something more like home.

In the first half of the 20th century, some 6 million Black Southerners moved to Boston, New York, Chicago, and other Northern cities in search of better opportunity. The Great Migration, which lasted until the 1970s, reshaped American economic and cultural life.

But in a trend scholars call the Reverse Great Migration, some young Black people are moving back to the region and sometimes the cities their grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ generations left behind. It’s been going on for decades, and may be accelerating now in Boston.

“You had millions of African Americans who left the South and thought [it] was not a kind place for Black people,” said Sabrina Pendergrass, an assistant professor of African American and African Studies at the University of Virginia. “Now, African Americans are saying, ‘[The South] is the place where I want to live.’ ”



Genevieve Bien-Aime, 36, said she enjoys Houston because of its thriving African American culture and welcoming atmosphere. “Boston is a small city but hard to connect,” she said. “This place is one-size-fits-all.” JOHNNY HANSON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Though Massachusetts’ Black population increased between 2010 and 2020, [the Greater Boston area lost roughly 8,800 Black residents](#), according to census population estimates. But even more may have left. Demographer William Frey said that figure doesn’t include those who checked “two or more races” or “other” on their census, and Boston has substantial Caribbean and Afro-Latino populations.

Some moved to the suburbs outside Boston. But others left the state. On average, about half of the roughly 11,700 Black residents leaving Massachusetts each year between 2015 and 2020 were moving to Southern states, according to Frey’s analysis

of annual American Community Survey data. The most popular destinations were Georgia and Florida, each welcoming an average of 1,400 and 1,300 annual newcomers, respectively.

There is no single factor behind the trend. But in more than a dozen interviews with young Black Bostonians who've moved to Southern cities in the last couple of years, the cost of housing was a leading driver.

Many Black families in Boston, largely because of the racist lending and housing policies that prevailed in the 20th century, lack the kind of generational wealth required to enter the Greater Boston housing market, where the median home price [spiked to nearly \\$900,000](#) earlier this year

Southern cities also tend to have more of a [visible Black middle class](#), more Black home ownership, and more Black people generally. Black business ownership and leadership create professional opportunities that might not come as easily, or at all, in a city where white people still hold so much decision-making power.

And perhaps most importantly to many Black twenty- and thirtysomethings, the social scene in Southern cities like Miami, Atlanta, and Houston feels more vibrant, diverse, and fluid.

Amber Williams, 37, a queer artist from Roxbury known as SublimeLuv, moved to Miami last year. She revels in the energy of her adopted city's wealth of BIPOC queer festivals and organizations, richly influenced by its history as a stopping point for Caribbean immigrants.

The vibe in Miami "matches the weather," she said. "It feels so warm."

She also traded an \$850-a-month one-bedroom in Mattapan with a view of parked cars and a dismal patch of yard for a \$1,000-a-month Miami houseshare that includes gym membership, pool, and a palm tree outside her window.

“I’m surrounded by beauty,” she said.

Pendergrass said the younger African American transplants she’s interviewed for her research “have more optimistic perspectives” about being Black in the South than their parents or grandparents who had greater “proximity to Jim Crow and experiences of seeing white flight in Northern cities like Boston and Detroit.”

“The younger generations have their own personal experiences of seeing how racism played out in Northern and Western cities,” she said.

Other Black transplants are children of Afro-Caribbean immigrants who don’t have Southern roots or relatives, said LaToya Tavernier, a Lynn-based educator who wrote her doctoral dissertation on the Afro-Caribbean migration to Atlanta in recent decades.

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‘It’s that sense of community that I didn’t have in Massachusetts that I have here.’

Laila Christian, student at Spelman College in Atlanta



But like African Americans, she said, they’re drawn to “a place where their Blackness will not keep them from opportunity.” Visible Black professionals in Southern “Black meccas” hold the promise of success for them, too.

That’s how Dorchester native Emanuel Riggins felt when he visited friends in Atlanta in 2019 and saw Black shoppers in designer brands at malls and hung out at glitzy clubs where roped-off, VIP sections are the norm.

“If you’ve lived in Boston for 27 years and then go somewhere and see a thriving Black middle class, you’re like, ‘Oh, I can thrive here,’ ” said Riggins, 30, who credits his move with helping jump-start his career as a [rap musician](#).

The South's scores of historically Black colleges and universities are also a draw, offering some Black suburban teens the chance for a sense of belonging they've never experienced before.

Laila Christian, 20, toured Tufts University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst as a junior at Natick High, but the schools' lack of Black students "just felt like going to high school," where she was one of the few Black kids in her graduating class, she said.

She hadn't considered an HBCU until her white cheer coach brought her to an event with recruiters from Howard, North Carolina A&T, and Florida A&M University, and she found herself "surrounded by people that looked like me, talked like me, and felt like I did."

Christian now attends Spelman College in Atlanta, where she's studying biology and feels bonded to "a sisterhood" of young Black women who look out for one another.

"It's that sense of community that I didn't have in Massachusetts that I have here," Christian said. "That just wasn't something I was going to get somewhere else."

Boston Mayor Michelle Wu's administration has taken note of the outmigration, and its potential consequences for the city. Segun Idowu, chief of economic opportunity and inclusion, said the city has a strategy for containing the loss, which he feels diminishes Boston's cultural identity: Targeting residents of color with homeownership programs; devoting \$9 million of federal pandemic relief funding towards BIPOC businesses of all sizes; and tasking Boston's director of strategic initiatives with plotting creative ways to revive nightlife.

"We've been doing a great job of transforming the city so that when you list Atlanta, LA, Houston, D.C., Boston will be on the list of a place where Black people want to go," he said. "We're working to get all those people who are leaving to want to come back."

But Julian C. Tynes, 37, doesn't see himself leaving Houston anytime soon.

Tynes, a talent recruiter, also tried to address Boston's lack of Black social spaces when he was living here. As a side gig, he created Profressh, an events and entertainment brand for the area's young professionals.

Like Bien-Aime, though, he ran into structural challenges: Liquor licenses are scarce and extremely costly in Boston. There are few Black businesses, meaning "you have to go through another culture" to book a venue, he said. That is, if you can even convince a manager to host your event.

"Getting a fair deal is like jumping through hoops," Tynes said.

He also wasn't earning enough from his day job to finance his ultimate goal: owning a home, a financial foundation he felt would offer his two school-age daughters greater freedom as they grew older.

"My dad always said, 'The more options you have in life, the better quality of life you'll have,' " Tynes said. "I want them to make decisions not because they have to, but because they want to."

He visited Miami and Atlanta, and thought about D.C. as well. But in the end, he chose Houston.

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'I came down here, and immediately, I felt accepted. I didn't feel like an outsider.'

Julian Tynes



Texas's largest city, with a population of nearly 2.3 million, isn't immune to the issues that plague his hometown. Its neighborhoods remain segregated. Its public school

district has battled state takeovers due to low performance. Many longtime residents are moving to the suburbs because housing costs are rising. Its jumbled, expansive street network makes it difficult to live without a car.

Still, housing prices are significantly lower than Boston's — the median single family home price in the Houston metro area peaked at about \$355,000 in June — and both renters and buyers get more space for their money. New immigrants from Mexico, India, and Vietnam join the Indigenous, Tejano, African American, Cajun, Creole, and Czech communities that have lived here longer, creating a welcoming multicultural scene. Fewer zoning restrictions means more opportunities for Black entrepreneurs.

A good number of Houston's popular hangout spots are Black-owned, so anyone seeking Black-centered social life can find it anytime. An hour after Sunday church services, or at 2 p.m. on a Tuesday, Houston's brunch spots are in full swing. Crowds of young Black patrons in sundresses and luxury brands dine on catfish and grits or chicken and waffles, beckoning servers to help them capture the perfect Instagram reel.

Tynes, had considered relocating for years, but it was only last February, in the heat of the pandemic, that he booked a monthlong Airbnb in Houston. A few days after he arrived, he signed off from his remote job in Boston and hopped over to the Galleria location of Prospect Park, a sports bar with live music whose Black owners have handled events for the likes of Drake, Jay-Z, and LeBron James. There, he encountered what locals considered a "slow winter weeknight." People were popping open bottles, laughing and eating and having a good time.

"I was like, 'What is going on?' " he recalled with a laugh. "People are walking in at 12:30 or 1 a.m. . . . It's a Wednesday!" At that moment, Tynes "was a thousand percent sure" he'd move there.

"I came down here, and immediately, I felt accepted," Tynes said. "I didn't feel like an

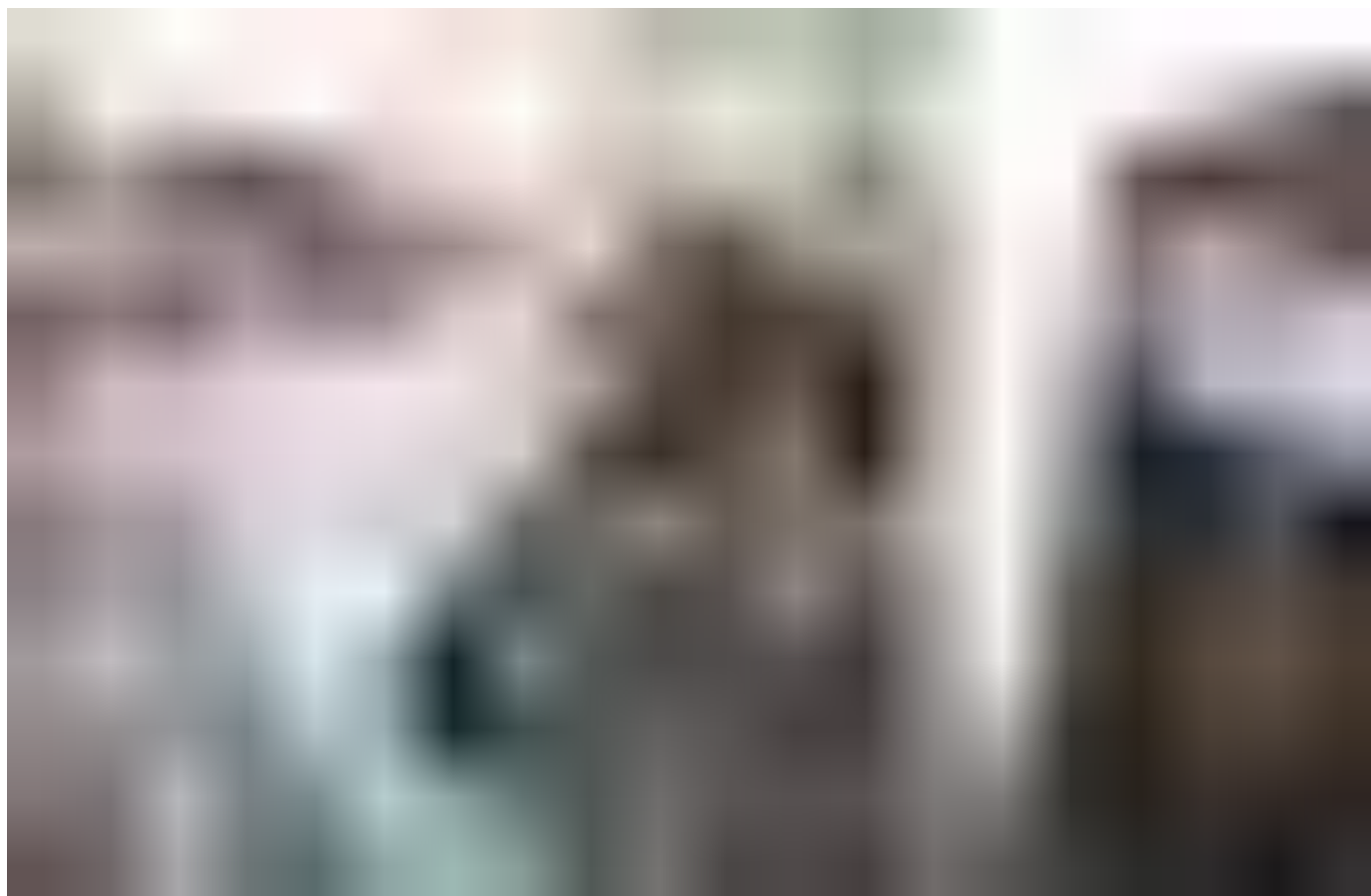
outsider.”

He has experienced some breakdowns in the city’s atmosphere of tolerance. Once, when he jaywalked across a street in Uptown Houston, a driver called him a racial slur. But he said he shrugged it off: “Racism stems from someone else’s insecurities.”

The specter of hate, the kind that goes viral on social media, was one of Evandra Guerrier-Senat’s main concerns when she first contemplated leaving Weymouth for a more affordable city in the South.

“There’s always been this stigma that the South is racist, and that’s it,” said Guerrier-Senat, who grew up in West Roxbury. “I thought I wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

But as Guerrier-Senat, 28, explained in an interview on the patio of her new apartment in Houston on a humid, stormy evening this fall, her first six months in the city have convinced her the South is the “total opposite of what she thought.” She’s taken aback by the offhanded friendliness she often encounters; strangers will strike up conversations, instead of putting on “tunnel vision” to get to their final destination.



Evandra Guerrier-Senat, 28, a former West Roxbury resident, at her new Houston apartment. She said she never imagined she'd ever have a walk-in closet. JOHNNY HANSON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A pharmacy technician, Guerrier-Senat is settling into her new \$1,095-a-month apartment in a gated complex in Houston's Texas Medical Center neighborhood. She's hung a framed quote near the front door: "Do something today your future self will thank you for."

Houston's dating scene, Guerrier-Senat said, has defied all expectations. She's had plenty of suitors, who can afford cars and even offer to pick her up, though she politely declines.

"Southern men are raised differently," Guerrier-Senat said.

Those different upbringings sometimes give rise to moments of friction with potential matches over political matters. She's encountered more socially conservative men who don't support abortion rights. This has made Guerrier-Senat, who is pro-abortion rights, miss home sometimes.

“Though people think Boston is a very racist city, Massachusetts is still a blue state at the end of the day . . . and they don’t play when it comes to [abortion rights],” she said.

She also wants to find a church to continue her Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, but the array of megachurches she’s looked into seem too political for her liking. Texas’s gun subculture “is too much,” she added, though she’s contemplating getting a firearm to protect herself.

Houston has a lot to offer, but it’s lacking the strong Afro-Caribbean culture that has taken root in Boston, Guerrier-Senat said. In her new hometown, if she’s seeking dance clubs blasting soca or Haitian food, “I have to go out of my way to find it.”

The move has given her newfound confidence, she explains, as she shows a visitor around her spacious living room and bedroom. In her walk-in closet, she grabs a bright orange, form-fitting dress. Guerrier-Senat bought it when she was 21, but never found the occasion, or courage, to wear it until moving to Houston this April.

“You can never be too extra,” she said with a smile. “Now, I don’t care if I’m doing too much because I know I’m the person in the room.”

Feeling reinvigorated by her new life in Houston, Bien-Aime has revived The Other Boston under a new name, [The Other Vibe](#) The brand offers online listings of Black social and community events in both Houston and Boston.

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But she’s not going back: “Hell has to freeze over.”

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