

Changing Lusospheres

**Europe, Brazil, Africa. On old and new connections
between centers and peripheries**

*Elisabeth Boesen, Karl Heinz Arenz,
Cristina Donza Cancela & Antonio Otaviano Vieira Junior*

A Colônia Luxemburguesa
Unearthing a century of steel ties between Luxembourg and Brazil
(1921–2022)

Dominique Santana

Changing lusospheres – Europe, Brazil, Africa. On old and new
connections between centers and peripheries

Edited by Elisabeth Boesen, Karl Heinz Arenz, Cristina Donza Cancela,
Antonio Otaviano Vieira Junior

Published in Melusina Press (Universität Luxemburg), 2025
11, Porte des Sciences
L-4366 Esch-sur-Alzette
<https://www.melusinapress.lu>

Management:	Niels-Oliver Walkowski, Johannes Pause
Copyediting:	Carolyn Knaup, Niels-Oliver Walkowski
Editorial Design:	Valentin Henning, Erik Seitz
Cover image:	Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

The digital version of this publication is freely available at <https://www.melusinapress.lu>.

Bibliographic information of the National Library of Luxembourg: The National Library of Luxembourg lists this publication in the Luxembourg National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at bnl.public.lu.

Print and Distribution is carried out by BoD - Books on Demand, Norderstedt

ISSN (Web):	2716-7518
DOI (Publication):	10.26298/1981-5708-aclu
DOI (Container):	10.26298/1981-5708
ISBN (Web):	978-2-919815-70-8
ISBN (PDF):	978-2-919815-71-5
ISBN (Epub):	978-2-919844-00-5
ISBN (Print):	978-2-919815-82-1

This work is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. Information about this license can be found at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de>. The images and resources contained in this work are subject to the same license unless licensed otherwise or taken from another source.





2025



A Colônia Luxemburguesa: Unearthing a century of steel ties between Luxembourg and Brazil (1921–2022)

Dominique Santana

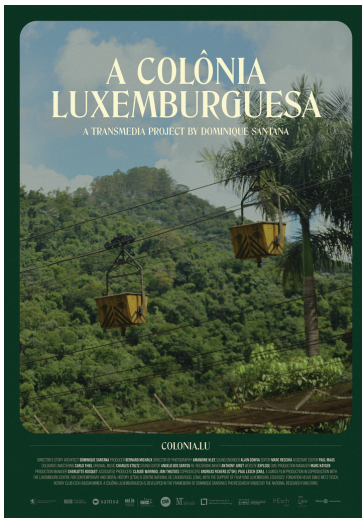


FIGURE 1: Poster of the transmedia project *A Colônia Luxemburguesa*.
© Samsa Film

Introduction

In the aftermath of the First World War, in reaction to the major constraints associated with the post-war crisis and the dissolution of the Zol-lverein, the Belgian–Luxembourgish steel conglomerate Aciéries Réunies de Burbach-Eich-Dudelange (ARBED)—today, ArcelorMittal—established

in 1911, launched an ambitious expansion plan with the aim of becoming an important player in the international steel market. In 1920, the sales company Comptoir Métallurgique Luxembourgeois (Columeta) was created to commercialize ARBED's outputs worldwide. In the same year, the Syndicat du Brésil was created with the purpose of carefully preparing overseas investments for ARBED. In 1921, ARBED established and invested in two subsidiaries in South America: Companhia Siderúrgica Belgo Mineira (CSBM), in the state of Minas Gerais, and Talleres Metalurgicos San Martin (TAMET), in Buenos Aires.

The establishment of the Belgo Mineira in December 1921 was technically a venture by foreign European investors and the Companhia Siderúrgica Mineira, established in Sabará in 1917 by Cristiano Guimarães and Amaro Lanari, who were both well-connected and highly influential *mineiros* from the Ouro Preto elite (Lourenço Neto 2013, 374). At that time, the lack of a qualified local workforce provoked a massive movement of hundreds of Luxembourgish migrants to Brazil to build a colossal steel plant and a surrounding industrial town called João Monlevade, which became the cradle of the Brazilian steel industry. This fostered the emergence of the so-called Colônia Luxemburguesa and a century of migration trajectories between both regions.

This chapter briefly traces this unique history of migration between Luxembourg and Brazil, revealing the multidimensional interconnections between technological, corporate, social, and cultural transfers in a world of growing nationalism and increasing immigration restrictions, and at a time when modernization processes and commercial networks were extending across the globe.

By diving into the nucleus of this migrant community to examine it from various angles, this chapter focuses on the creation and development of the Colônia Luxemburguesa, its ambiguous relationship with its residents' home country and Brazilian society, as well as its current legacy and remembrance work. Aiming to unearth these historical transatlantic steel ties by actively involving the public in the process, the transmedia project *A Colônia Luxemburguesa*, developed in the framework of my PhD research, creates a dialogical relationship between corporate archives and different microhistorical, bottom-up perspectives captured through oral history interviews and collected ego-documents. Ultimately,



FIGURE 2: Postcard showing João Monlevade in the 1950s. © Centro de Memória ArcelorMittal Brasil.

it uncovers the puzzling portrait of the so-called *Colônia Luxemburguesa* and its remembrance work,¹ and it analyses the consistent use of corporate diplomacy² strategies to ensure the success of the company and the colony in the host society.

Situating the “imigrante Europeu” in the historical context of Brazil’s colonial heritage

In 1817, almost a century before the arrival of ARBED in Minas Gerais, a French industrialist named Jean-Antoine-Félix Dissandes de Monlevade³ settled in the vast mining area of Minas Gerais. There, he lived in a colo-

¹ See Chapter 5 – “Belgostalgia” – of the interactive documentary.

² See Chapter 6 of the interactive documentary.

³ This is the French industrialist Jean de Monlevade’s full name, but he is generally referred to as simply “Jean de Monlevade.”

nial house, the Fazenda Solar, and “owned” approximately one hundred slaves who worked either as domestic servants or in the exploitation of iron ore for his Catalan forge. Jean de Monlevade lived with his family in a *casa-grande* (his Fazenda Solar), and his slaves were bunked in an adjacent *senzala*, in line with the colonial hierarchical standards extensively described by the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1934).

In the context of the abolition process in Brazil, which started with the “Law of the Free Womb” in 1871 and culminated with the formal abolition of slavery in 1888 (Machado et al. 2021), the businesses of the Monlevade family were no longer profitable, and the descendants decided to end their industrial activities and seek new opportunities in the cities. After the death of Jean de Monlevade in 1872, the local steel forge of Monlevade, which had fallen into disrepair, was sold to the Companhia Nacional de Forjas e Estaleiros. That company went bankrupt in 1897, and the property was passed to a Brazilian bank until 1920, when Gaston Barbanson, the president of ARBED, acquired this vast and abandoned territory (Moyen 2006, 35).

The Fazenda Solar and the activities of the French migrant Jean de Monlevade played a crucial role in Belgo Mineira’s corporate storytelling and were purposely instrumentalized as a successful example of continuing European “pioneerism” in the region of João Monlevade. As such, in the corporate storytelling, Jean de Monlevade’s legacy lays the perfect foundation for Belgo Mineira’s “pioneerism” with the settlement of the Colônia Luxemburguesa in the early twentieth century.⁴

Situating the history of this transatlantic migration in the broader context of the region’s colonial heritage helps us to see the continuity of colonial power structures in the evolution from free slave labor to remunerated industrial workers in João Monlevade—or the evolution “*da Senzala à Vila Operária*,” from the slaves’ barracks to the industrial village.⁵ Until its emancipation as a municipality in 1964, João Monlevade was the pri-

4 See Chapter 2 of the interactive documentary.

5 See the following clips from Chapter 2 of the interactive documentary: “Intro,” “Jean de Monlevade,” “Why settle in Monlevade?” and “Colonial Heritage”. <https://colonia.lu/chapter2?ending=1>



FIGURE 3: The tombs of Jean de Monlevade and Louis Ensich, the two European “pioneers, visionaries and founders” of João Monlevade, symbolically resting next to each other in the Cemetery of the Slaves. © Samsa Film

vate property of the steel company and every aspect of the employees’ lives was fully controlled by the company’s senior executives. Today, João Monlevade remains a central industrial hub, with a population of approximately 86,000 inhabitants and where the main economic activities revolve around steel production.⁶

In João Monlevade, this migrant community thus forged its own tropical version of Luxembourg, a microcosm surrounded by iron-ore mountains in the heart of the vast mining area of Minas Gerais, building its social and hierarchical structures on the foundations of the region’s colonial heritage.

⁶ The cities of João Monlevade (in Brazil) and Esch-sur-Alzette (in Luxembourg) have become sister cities in response to the transatlantic dialogue between the two mining regions, which was initiated with our transmedia project (colonia.lu) to unearth their common social, cultural, and industrial heritage.

Life under “Mother Belgo”



FIGURE 4: Luxembourgish families living on Rua Siderúrgica in João Monlevade. © Private collection: Steil family.

As a member of the *Colônia Luxemburguesa* and an employee of Belgo Mineira, you adopted the company values and policies as your own, and “Mother Belgo” was the overarching figure from which you would seek guidance and refuge. This blurred the lines between being an autonomous person and being a form of capital that could be cultivated. Hence, as a member of the “Belgo family,” you had to live the policies and values of the company.

The hierarchical structures of the “Belgo family” were not merely implicit. On the contrary, they can still be felt in the streets of João Monlevade—so explicitly that the verticality of the society is perfectly aligned with the verticality of the valley. The director of the steel plant and the European engineers lived at the top of the valley slopes, the technicians and foremen in the middle, and the workers by the river.

The fourth chapter of the interactive documentary clearly demonstrates how all the houses, the different leisure clubs, and even the church played

crucial roles in strategically and systematically segregating the “Belgo family” according to the professional ranking, gender, ethnicity, and social class of each community member.



FIGURE 5: Drone shot of João Monlevade, 2022. © Samsa Film.

A Colônia Luxemburguesa: A Participatory Transmedia Project on Steel-Framed Migration from Luxembourg to Brazil (1921–2022)

A Colônia Luxemburguesa (www.colonia.lu) is an interactive experience and a journey of discovery in which, steeped in myth and history, we are confronted with many stories told from various angles and across different platforms.⁷ What is behind Belgo Mineira’s corporate storytelling? Are we able to find the truth in the midst of all those divergent stories?

⁷ The website is free to access in four languages (English, Portuguese, French, and German).

This transdisciplinary project was developed in the framework of my doctoral research (Santana 2022). It is an inventive digital public history experiment involving the creative use of digital technology, transdisciplinary co-design techniques, and public engagement. Through this unprecedented collaboration between the University of Luxembourg (Centre for Contemporary and Digital History–C2DH), Samsa Film, and the Centre national de l’audiovisuel (CNA), we are creating new synergies between scientific research and the world of film and new media.



FIGURES 6: Stills of the project website www.colonia.lu. © Samsa Film

This 360-degree transmedia project, whose narrative transcends various mediums and platforms, gracefully combines, firstly, the project website www.colonia.lu with an interactive documentary, an interactive map, interactive profiles, and an online crowdsourcing platform with, secondly, two physical and fully participatory platforms called “[L]aço kiosks,” located in Luxembourg and in Brazil. The wordplay [L]aço (laço=tie; aço=steel) literally means ties of steel. Positioned in the public space, close to the target communities, the [L]aço kiosks’ main purpose is to unearth transatlantic steel ties that were woven over a century in collaboration with the communities themselves. It is this mutual exchange—this trading zone between the communities and our various

platforms—that is drawing a multifaceted picture of the Colônia Luxemburguesa.⁸



FIGURES 7: Stills of the project website www.colonia.lu. © Samsa Film

References

- Freyre, Gilberto. *Casa Grande & Senzala*. Rio de Janeiro: Maya & Schmidt, 1934.
- Lourenço Neto, Sydenham. “Estado e Empresariado no Nascimento da Questão Siderúrgica Brasileira.” *Saeculum Revista de História* 29 (2013):365-382. <http://periodicos.ufpb.br/ojs/index.php/srh/article/view/19828>
- Machado, Maria Helena P. T., Da Cru Brito, Luciana, Da Silva Viana, Iamara and Flávio dos Santos Gomes (eds.). *Ventres livres? Gênero, maternidade e legislação*. São Paulo: Editora UNESP, 2021.

⁸ Please discover this project here: www.colonia.lu.

- Moyen, François. *A História da Companhia Siderúrgica Belgo-Mineira. Uma trajetória de crescimento consistente (1921–2005)*. Belo Horizonte: Arcelor Brasil S/A, 2007.
- Santana, Dominique. *Intertwined Destinies & Strengthened Ties: “A Colônia Luxemburguese.” A Participatory Transmedia Project on Steel-framed Migration from Luxembourg to Brazil (1921–2022)*. PhD diss., University of Luxembourg, 2022.