Ancestral Voices discusses the stories told about the Island’s ancient gods and ruling chiefs from its creation origins up to the early mission period in the 19th century. The stories of the gods describe encounters with the domain of tuārangi ‘spirit beings’, among whom are included the Island’s principal gods, visitors from other Pacific Islands and European explorers such as James Cook. The Island’s ruling chiefs controlled access to the economic and spiritual resources of Mangaia. Their stories relate the struggles for dominance over the lands and peoples, and the ritual sacrifices that were performed to ensure recognition of that chiefly rule by the gods.

Ancestral Voices transcribes and interprets a series of indigenous historical texts, including proverbs, songs and narratives, as told by generations of Mangaian scholars, notably the tribal historian, Mamae, and by outsider scholars, particularly, the missionary, William Wyatt Gill, and Te Rangi Hiroa.

Available from The Polynesian Society, c/- Maori Studies, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019 Auckland. Email: jps@auckland.ac.nz $NZ40 / $NZ34 for Polynesian Society members (plus postage and packing)

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The title of the book suggests a critical examination of a particular period in the history of the South Pacific. Unfortunately the actual narrative deals with only three areas—Hawai‘i, Samoa and Fiji—with only passing references to the wider region. At a time when labour recruiters from several countries were active in areas such as Melanesia, the impact of Gerald Horne’s influx of disenfranchised and disenchanted Americans is somewhat over-inflated. Clearly Horne is an enthusiastic researcher and he provides many glimpses into the period by quoting from journals and the media. These illustrate the prevailing attitude, although the quotations sometimes interfere with the flow of the narrative. The attention to detail in his archival research has added multiple layers of interest to his tale, but it is difficult to assess the value of the sources used in the absence of a list. A bibliography would have been helpful, especially for the student who wants to do more reading on the topic.

There have been many other works on this topic, including those by Peter Corris, H.E. Maude, Dorothy Shineberg and, more recently, Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australian–Pacific Indentured Labor Trade by Tracy Banivanua-Mar, but few have addressed the topic of the United States’ involvement in detail. While Horne’s research touches on other parts of the Pacific region, including Australia and New Zealand, there is a lack of detailed information about areas other than Hawai‘i, Samoa and Fiji. Despite using several illustrations of the most notorious labour traders, such as “Bully” Hayes and James Proctor, Horne does not discuss the successful employment of labourers and their subsequent repatriation after serving their term. Not all labourers were reluctant participants and many worked the system to their own advantage. In the Solomons, the desire for the trappings of European culture such as guns, iron tools and personal adornments drew many to seek passage on a labour ship and the goods that they brought back with them were valuable for trade. While Americans did find a new source of labour in the Pacific, nonetheless Horne overstates their role; Britain, France and Germany were significantly more active in the labour trade. Germany’s plantations in Samoa and Melanesia required the services of imported labour and German authorities expressed concern at the loss of a Melanesian labour source when part of its Solomon Islands territory, including Choiseul and Santa Isabel, were ceded to Britain in 1899.

The implications of blackbirding, whether by Americans or others, were widespread. Family groups were split up and there was a great deal of depopulation in parts of Melanesia. Islanders returned to their homes but were often dissatisfied
with their traditional lifestyle. In Melanesia, labourers returned to a location other than their home were often in danger of being killed. Misunderstandings were common. One of the most well-known was the murder of Bishop John Coleridge Patteson, on Nukapu in 1871. A climate of distrust of any foreign vessels had developed in the area, and the opportunity to avenge islanders who had been unwilling or unwitting captives was not to be missed. Patteson was clubbed to death as he slept. While there were several possible motives for his death, the most likely explanation was that he and his companions on the *Southern Cross* were mistaken for blackbirders. The subsequent passing into law of the Pacific Islanders’ Protection Act in England in 1872 was reputedly due in part to Patteson’s death.

Horne’s description of the development of the Ku Klux Klan and its renaming as the British Subjects Mutual Protection Society in Fiji draws attention to the considerable influence that American settlers and plantation owners, though small in numbers, had in Fiji as they brought with them their disillusionment at the end of slavery in the United States. The formation of the organisation stirred up unease among many of the white settlers, and encouraged settlers to retreat into the safety of the company of like-minded people. Fiji was the site of other atrocities against indigenous Fijians including hunting parties, not necessarily American, which went on expeditions to kill Fijians for sport.

The book gives the impression of a series of articles rather than a coherent work, and it is not until the section on Hawai‘i that Horne begins to deal with the problems which directly related to the United States. Hawai‘i was an area of contention for Britain and the United States with its strategic importance not only as a coaling station but also as a site for a communications cable station. The looming imperial presence of Japan is woven into the narrative, and the last chapter’s tenuous connection of the Japanese presence in 19th century Hawai‘i to the Second World War, entitled “Towards Pearl Harbour—and Beyond”, concludes this account of a dastardly trade in the Pacific. A serendipitous link with current events occurs with Horne’s reference to Barack Obama’s Hawaiian background and his possible connection with the Nation of Islam.

The book is readable and will be attractive to a general audience, but as a scholarly work there are some shortcomings. As a superficial overview of the labour trade in the Pacific this book succeeds, but its overarching theme of American imperialism inclines it towards the realms of jingoistic American propaganda.