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Investigators will travel to Antarctica after claims of sexual assault at U.S. bases

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Juliana Kim



McMurdo Station is photographed from the air on Oct. 27, 2014.

National Science Foundation via AP

Investigators with the National Science Foundation's watchdog office are heading to Antarctica in response to longtime allegations of sexual misconduct at U.S. research stations there — which the NSF director has described as a "pervasive problem."

Special agents are expected to arrive Monday at McMurdo Station, the largest research hub on the continent where hundreds of scientists conduct fieldwork. The visit is scheduled through Nov. 17.

"Members of our investigative staff will be visiting McMurdo to prepare for a future on-site presence in Antarctica and meet with staff to explain our role," Lisa Vonder Haar, the chief of staff for the NSF's inspector general, said in a statement.

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Sexual harassment and assault plague U.S. research bases in Antarctica, report says

The trip comes more than a year after the release of a damning report by the NSF, which oversees all American operations in Antarctica, cataloging a culture of harassment and assault within the U.S. Antarctic Program. In addition to McMurdo, the NSF also collected concerns of sexual misconduct at South Pole Station, Palmer Station and other U.S. research vessels in Antarctica.

Drawing on surveys of 880 current and recent employees, 59% of women said they had a negative experience with sexual harassment or assault during the program, while 95% of respondents said they knew of someone who was assaulted or harassed within the program.

"Every woman I knew down there had an assault or harassment experience that had occurred on ice," one interviewee told the report's authors. Another woman in the report called sexual assault and sexual harassment "a fact of life" in Antarctica. Several men also recounted experiencing sexual harassment by men and women, according to the report.

The inquiry also revealed that a pervasive environment of harassment and assault was compounded by fears of retaliation.

"People on station fear, and rightfully so, that if they are harassed or assaulted and report it, they will be the ones who will be going home," one person told the report's authors. "When things happened on ice, the number one thing I heard was 'don't report it or you will go home and be blacklisted from the program.'"

The NSF commissioned the report in 2021 after years of reports of sexual misconduct. In 2018, three women came forward with allegations that Boston University geologist David Marchant had sexually harassed them during research expeditions to Antarctica while they were graduate students. He was later fired from his university. In a statement at the time, he denied the allegations.

"It wasn't surprising to me to hear some of the stories that we heard," said Roberta Marinelli, the director of the NSF's Office of Polar Programs, in an interview with NPR last year. "It's certainly disappointing."

The U.S. Antarctic Program sends more than 3,000 people — from researchers to cooks — to the bottom of the world each year. About one in three of them are women.

Over the past few months, the NSF watchdog office has been addressing complaints from Antarctica workers remotely. The upcoming visit is part of an effort to have a stronger presence on the ice, Vonder Haar added.

On Thursday, the NSF appointed Renée V. Ferranti as a new special assistant to the director tasked with sexual assault and harassment prevention and response implementation. Ferranti was previously the director of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response program at the Peace Corps. She begins her appointment on Sunday.

"Addressing this pervasive problem remains a top priority for me and the agency, and with Renee's expertise we will continue to adapt and further accelerate our efforts to address the evolving landscape of sexual assault prevention and response," Sethuraman Panchanathan, the director of NSF said in a statement.

Correction

Nov. 3, 2023

An earlier version of this story mistakenly said that investigators will be spending the next two weeks examining reports of sexual misconduct at U.S. research bases on Antarctica. Investigators will be arriving to prepare for a future on-site presence in Antarctica.



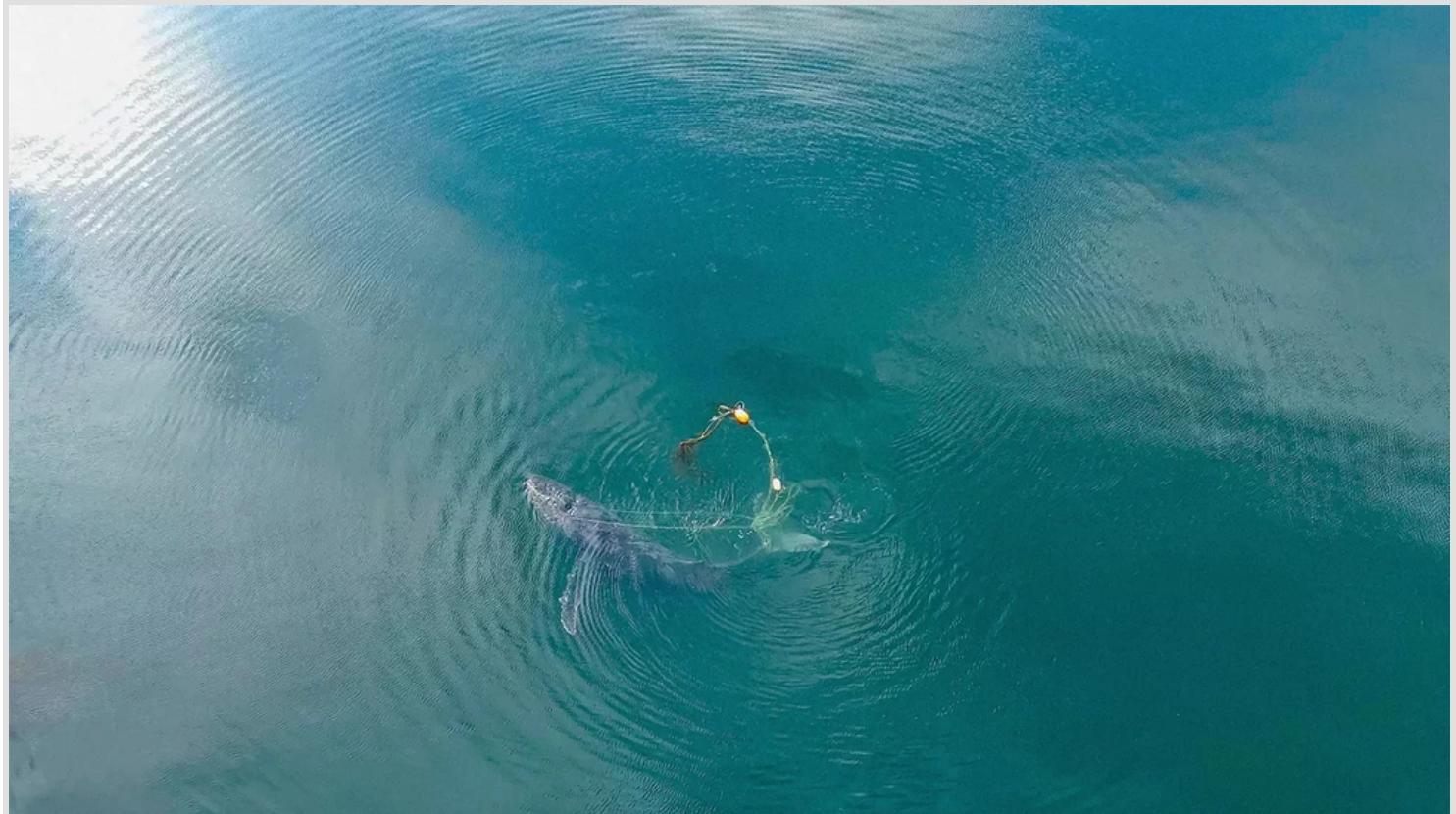
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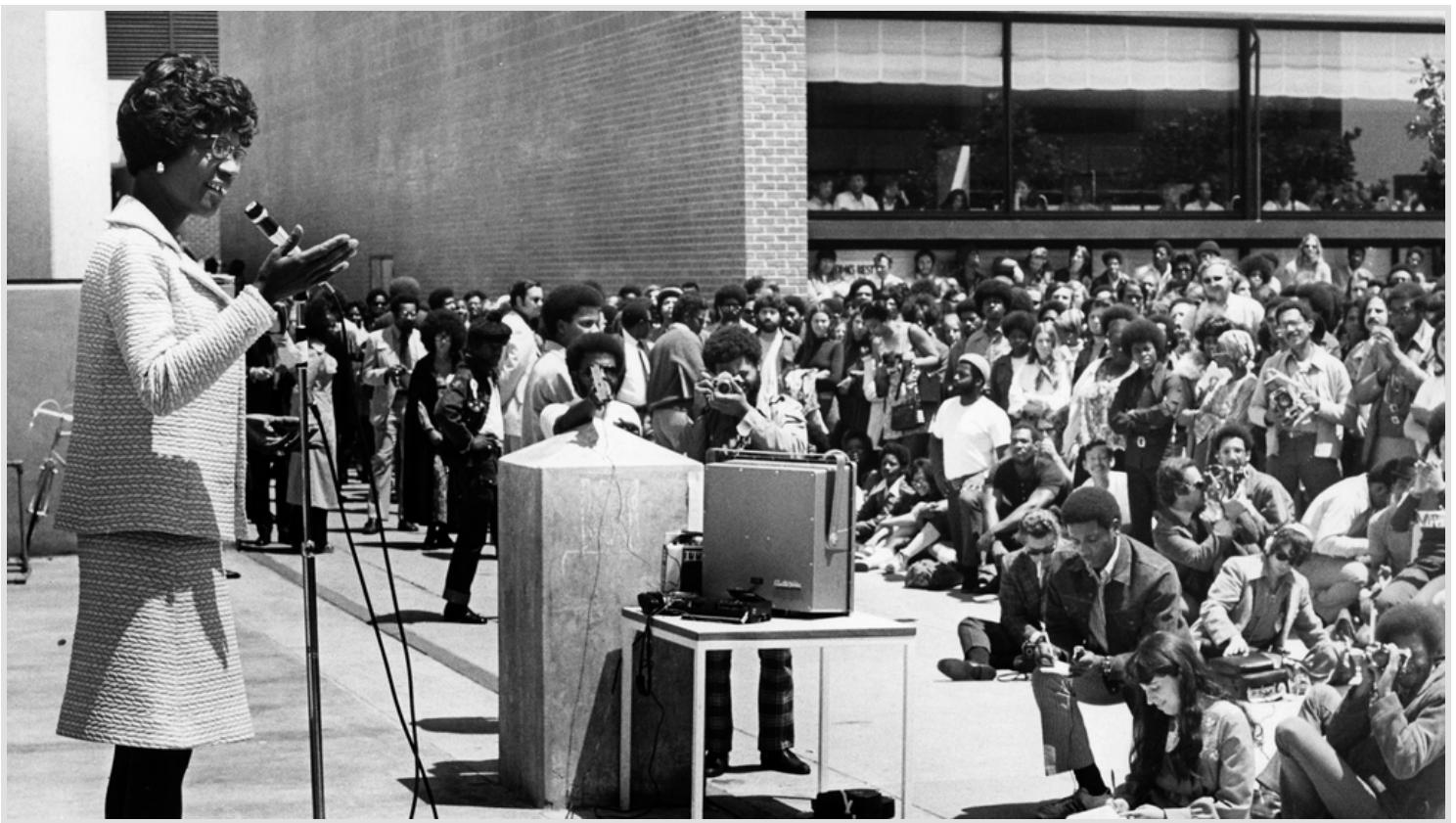
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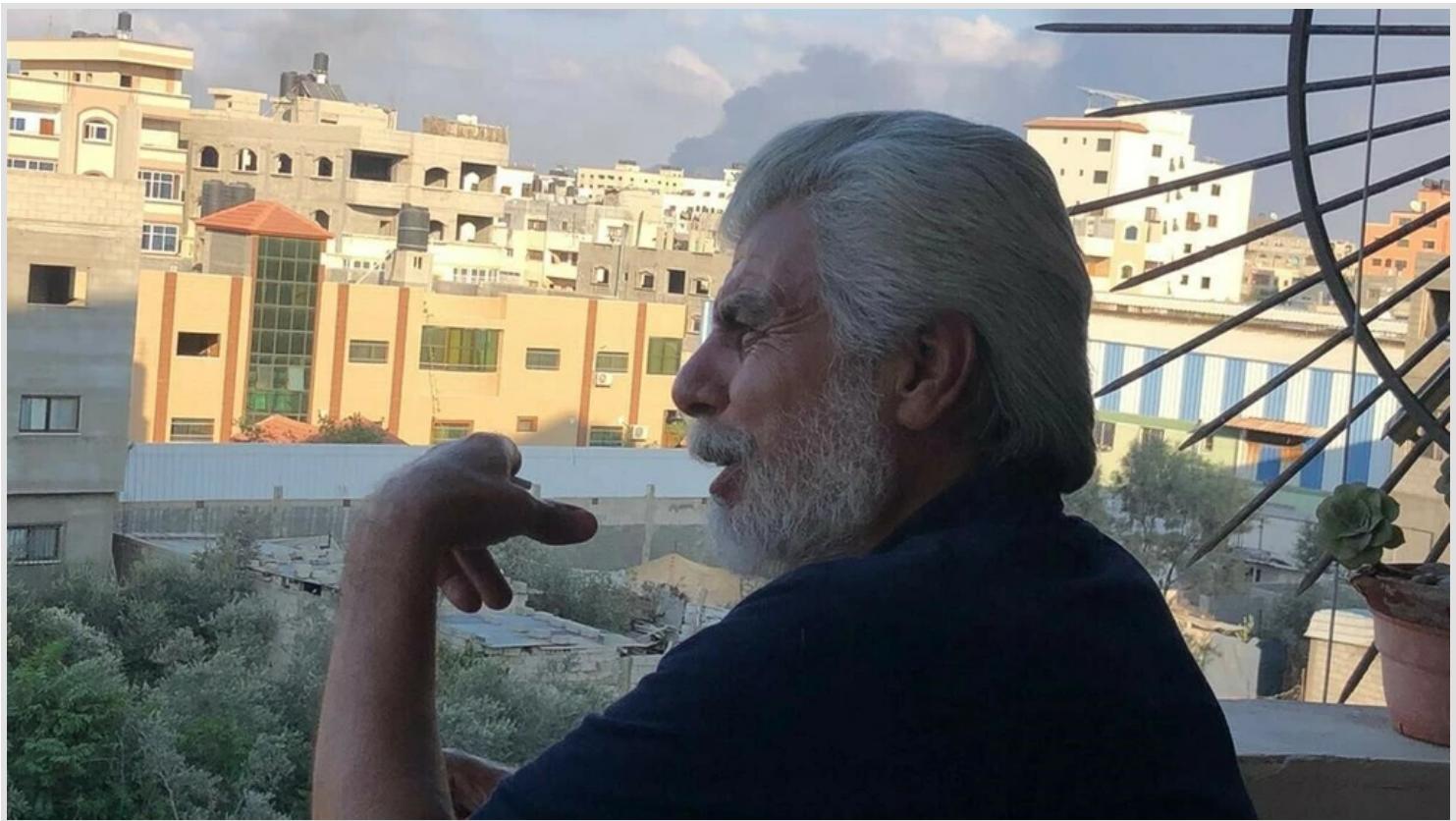
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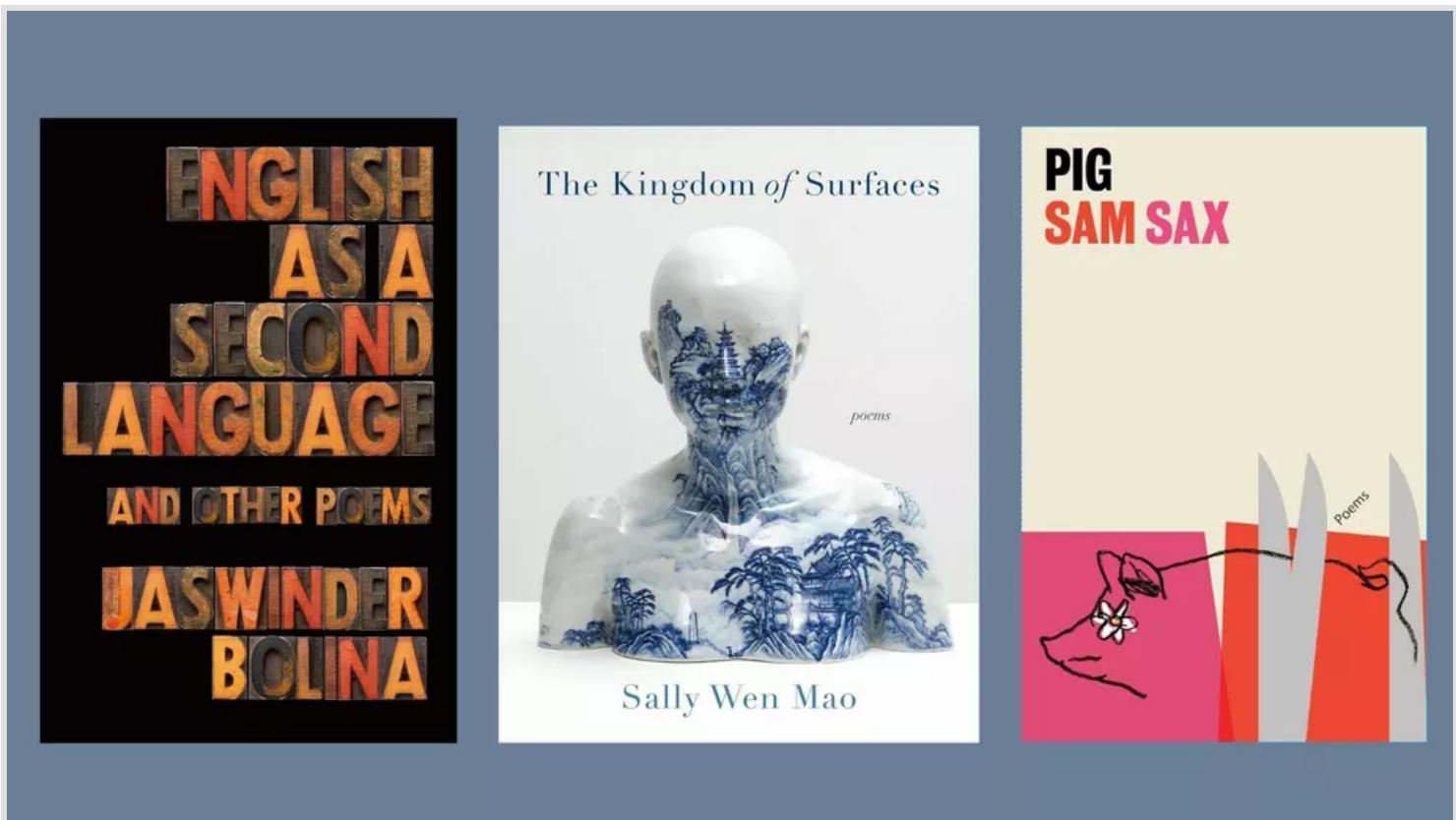
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