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A magnified compact galaxy at redshift 9.51 with strong nebular emission lines

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Ultraviolet light from early galaxies is thought to have ionized gas in the intergalactic medium. However, there are few observational constraints on this epoch, due to the faintness of those galaxies and the redshift of their optical light into the infrared. We report the observation, in James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) imaging, of a distant galaxy that is magnified by gravitational lensing. JWST spectroscopy of the galaxy, at rest-frame optical wavelengths, detects strong nebular emission lines due to oxygen and hydrogen. The measured redshift is $z = 9.51 \pm 0.01$, corresponding to 510 million years after the Big Bang. The galaxy has a radius of $16.2_{-7.2}^{+4.6}$ parsecs, substantially more compact than galaxies with equivalent luminosity at $z \sim 6$ to 8, leading to a high star formation rate surface density.

Radiation from early galaxies is thought to be responsible for the reionization of the Universe, the process in which the majority of the intergalactic neutral gas was ionized by high energy photons. Observational constraints suggest that reionization was completed when the Universe was approximately one billion years old (redshift $z \sim 6$) (1). The precise timeline of reionization, and the relative contributions of faint and bright galaxies to the ionizing photon budget, remain uncertain (2). Observations of distant galaxies that existed during the epoch of reionization provide information on the physical processes that occurred during that period (3).

The intrinsic faintness and small angular sizes of galaxies at high redshift limit our ability to observe them in detail. Due to their very large masses, galaxy clusters act as gravitational lenses, magnifying the flux and stretching the angular extent of distant background galaxies. Gravitational lensing can therefore extend the observational limits of a telescope, probing faint and small galaxies at high redshifts that would otherwise be undetectable (4).

Near-infrared imaging has identified distant galaxy candidates at $z \gtrsim 9$ and up to $z \approx 17$ (5–7), but the redshifts of those candidates have not been confirmed with spectroscopy.

Among these candidates are an unexpectedly large number of galaxies with bright ultraviolet (UV) absolute magnitudes ($M_{\text{UV}} \lesssim -21$ mag; (8–10)) and high stellar masses ($M_* > 10^{10}$ solar masses (M_{\odot}); (11)). This population was not predicted by simulations of early galaxy formation that assumed standard cosmology (12, 13). Spectroscopy is necessary to confirm the redshifts of these galaxies and infer their physical properties, from the strengths of their emission lines.

Nebular emission lines are produced by clouds of interstellar gas within a galaxy; spectroscopic analysis of these lines can provide information about the density, temperature, and chemical composition of the gas. Spectroscopy has confirmed three high-redshift galaxies ($7.66 < z < 8.50$) with detections of strong nebular emission lines (14) and the temperature-sensitive [O iii] 4363 Å emission line, which has been used to make direct electron temperature oxygen abundance measurements in galaxies at these redshifts (15–19). There has been further spectroscopic confirmation of seven galaxies from $z = 7.762$ to 8.998 (20).

Imaging observations and analysis

We observed the galaxy cluster RX J2129.6+0005 (hereafter RX J2129) on 2022 October 6 using the Near-Infrared Camera (NIRCam) instrument on JWST, operating in imaging mode as part of a director's discretionary time program (number DD 2767; PI P. Kelly). NIRCam is sensitive to wavelengths in the range 0.6 μm to 5.0 μm ; we obtained exposures in the F115W, F150W, F200W, F277W, F356W, and F444W filters (the name of each filter indicates its approximate central wavelength and bandwidth - for example, the central wavelength of the F115W filter is approximately 1.15 μm and it has a wide bandwidth of 0.225 μm). Our exposure times ranged from 2026 s for the F444W filter to 19,927 s for the F150W filter. The astrometric alignment for the NIRCam images was performed using a catalog prepared from previous imaging taken with the Suprime-Cam instrument on the Subaru telescope (21).

The color-composite NIRCam image of the RX J2129 cluster is shown in Fig. 1. In this image, we identified a candidate distant galaxy (which we designate as RX J2129-z95) which appears as three images due to the gravitational lensing of the foreground cluster. Coordinates for the three images, designated RX J2129-z95:G1, RX J2129-z95:G2, and RX J2129-z95:G3 (hereafter G1, G2 and G3), are given in Table S2. Photometric measurements from the NIRCam imaging, along with measurements from previous Hubble Space Telescope (HST) imaging of the RX J2129 cluster field obtained with the Advanced Camera for Surveys (ACS) and the Wide Field Camera 3 (WFC3), are listed in Table S1 (21).

We used the Eazy-py software (22) to constrain the photometric redshift (an estimate for a source's redshift made without the use of spectroscopy) for all sources in the field detected in the NIRCam imaging (21). We obtained a photometric redshift of $z_{\text{phot}} = 9.38^{+0.29}_{-0.15}$ for image G2 of RX J2129-z95. From the NIRCam photometry, we estimate a UV spectral slope (β) of -1.98 ± 0.11 (21). Using the F150W photometric flux measurement, and correcting for the effect of magnification due to gravitational lensing of image G2 (magnification $\mu = 20.2 \pm 3.8$ (21)), we calculate the absolute UV magnitude at 1500 \AA $M_{\text{UV}} = -1.72 \pm 0.22$ mag.

We used the Prospector software (23) to infer the physical properties of the galaxy from the spectral energy distribution (SED) of image G2, using the NIRCam photometry and non-detections from archival optical HST imaging (21). Before doing so, we corrected the photometry for the effect of magnification due to gravitational lensing. We find that the galaxy has a low stellar mass $\log(M_*/M_\odot) = 7.63^{+0.22}_{-0.24}$ (uncertainty is 1σ and includes the propagated uncertainty in magnification). The template fitting also indicates an oxygen abundance of $12 + \log(\text{O}/\text{H}) = 7.63^{+0.07}_{-0.05}$. The best-fitting star

formation history (SFH) has a mass-weighted age of 56^{+43}_{-34} Myrs and indicates a star formation rate (SFR) of $\text{SFR} = 0.9 \pm 0.32 M_\odot \text{yr}^{-1}$. The observed SED of image G2 and best fitting Prospector model are shown in Figure S3.

We use the Lenstruc software (24, 25) to reconstruct the F150W image of G2, correcting for the effects of gravitational lensing and the NIRCam point spread function (PSF). We fitted the reconstructed image with a surface brightness model, consisting of an elliptical Sèrsic profile with index n fixed to 0.5 (n determines the degree of curvature of the profile, with $n = 0.5$ being a Gaussian profile). This indicates the intrinsic half-light radius of the reconstructed source is $R_{\text{e,intrinsic}} = 16.2^{+4.6}_{-7.2}$ parsecs (pc) (Figure S7). We also fitted the observed F150W image directly, using the Galight software (26), which indicates an observed angular size of $\theta_{\text{e,observed}} = 0.04 \pm 0.01$ arcseconds (21).

Spectroscopic Observations and Analysis

We obtained follow-up spectroscopy of the RX J2129 cluster field on 2022 October 22, using JWST's Near Infrared Spectrograph (NIRSpec) in multi-object spectroscopy (MOS) mode. Targets were selected based on photometric redshift estimates from the NIRCam imaging. We used a standard 3-shutter dither pattern and obtained a 4464 s exposure using the prism disperser. This setup provides wavelength coverage from 0.6 μm to 5.3 μm , with spectral resolving power R ranging from ≈ 50 to ≈ 400 (27). The fully calibrated (21) one-dimensional (1D) and two-dimensional (2D) spectra are shown in Fig. 2.

We estimated the spectroscopic redshift of the galaxy by visual identification of the emission lines H β and [O iii] 4959,5007 \AA . We refined our redshift measurement by modeling the emission-line profiles (see below), which yields $z_{\text{spec}} = 9.51 \pm 0.01$. This spectroscopic redshift is consistent with the photometric redshift derived above ($z_{\text{phot}} = 9.38^{+0.29}_{-0.15}$), indicating that the lines have not been misidentified.

To constrain the fluxes of the emission lines, we use the pPXF (Penalized Pixel-Fitting) software (28), which models the stellar continuum and fits Gaussian profiles to each of the emission lines (21). Table 1 lists our measured emission-line fluxes, equivalent widths (EWs), and corresponding uncertainties. We do not detect the Ly α line of hydrogen, with a 3σ upper limit for its flux of approximately $39 \times 10^{-19} \text{ erg s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ (21). We assume negligible extinction due to dust and apply no reddening correction to the flux measurements (21).

We infer the star-formation rate (SFR) of the galaxy from our H β flux measurement using the relation

$$\text{SFR}/(M_\odot \text{year}^{-1}) = 5.5 \times 10^{-42} L(\text{H}\alpha)/(\text{erg s}^{-1}) \quad (1)$$

where $L(\text{H}\alpha)$ is the intrinsic $\text{H}\alpha$ luminosity of the galaxy. To compute $L(\text{H}\alpha)$, we correct for magnification due to lensing and assume Case B recombination (29). We find $\text{SFR} = 1.69_{-0.34}^{+0.51} M_{\odot} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ (21). This value is approximately 50% larger than the value we derived above from the SED ($0.90 \pm 0.32 M_{\odot} \text{ yr}^{-1}$), but the discrepancy is $< 2\sigma$. Using the stellar mass we inferred from the SED ($\log(M_*/M_{\odot}) = 7.63_{-0.24}^{+0.22}$), we compute the specific star formation rate (sSFR, the SFR per unit mass), finding $\log(\text{sSFR}) = -7.38 \pm 0.26 \text{ yr}^{-1}$.

To test for a spatial offset between the nebular emission and the stellar continuum, we extract profiles along the spatial axis of the NIRSpec MOS slit. We extract spatial profiles of the strong emission lines in $0.05 \mu\text{m}$ windows. For the stellar continuum, we extract the spatial profile of the spectrum at all wavelengths above $1.5 \mu\text{m}$, masking out the regions within $0.05 \mu\text{m}$ of any strong emission lines. We find no evidence for an offset between the nebular emission lines and stellar continuum (Figure S6).

We use the fluxes of the strongest emission lines of oxygen and hydrogen to estimate the oxygen abundance of the $z = 9.51$ galaxy. The high ratio $\text{O}_{32} \equiv F([\text{O iii}]) / F([\text{O ii}]) = 13 \pm 4$ we calculate for this galaxy is consistent with highly ionized gas with low metallicity. We therefore use an empirical calibration (30) measured from low-metallicity ($12 + \log(\text{O}/\text{H}) \lesssim 8.0$) galaxies,

$$12 + \log(\text{O}/\text{H}) = 0.950 \log(R_{23} - 0.08\text{O}_{32}) + 6.805 \quad (2)$$

where $R_{23} \equiv (F([\text{O ii}]3727 \text{ \AA}) + F([\text{O iii}]4959 \text{ \AA}) + F([\text{O iii}]5007 \text{ \AA})) / F(\text{H}\beta)$. For the $z = 9.51$ galaxy, we find an oxygen abundance of $12 + \log(\text{O}/\text{H}) = 7.48 \pm 0.08$, where the uncertainty includes both line-flux and calibration uncertainties (21). Using alternative calibrations (31, 32) results in consistent estimates. The oxygen abundance derived from the photometry is also consistent (within 1.5σ) with the emission line calibrations (21).

Galaxy properties in context

The high magnification provided by gravitational lensing enabled us to detect this intrinsically faint galaxy ($M_{\text{UV},1500} = -17.4 \pm 0.22 \text{ mag}$), which has strong emission lines. Without lensing magnification, the galaxy's apparent magnitudes would be too faint to detect in the JWST images. We measured a lower mass and luminosity than other galaxies with strong emission line detections at $z > 7$, but a similar sSFR (Figure S4).

Star-forming galaxies that have emission lines with very large EWs at $z \lesssim 2.5$ exhibit tight correlations between the EW of the $[\text{O iii}] 5007 \text{ \AA}$ emission line and the O_{32} ratio, and between the EWs of $[\text{O iii}] 5007 \text{ \AA}$ and $\text{H}\beta$ (37). The properties of the $z = 9.51$ galaxy are consistent with both of these

relations within 2σ (Figure S5). The high $\text{O}_{32} = 13 \pm 4$ we measure for this object is similar to that of other galaxies with high EW emission lines at high redshifts during the epoch of reionization, and of their local counterparts (38, 39). The high O_{32} might indicate a high escape fraction of hydrogen-ionizing radiation, f_{esc} . For example, using an empirical relation (40), we infer $f_{\text{esc}} = 0.65 \pm 0.45$. However, there is large scatter in this relation, and other methods of inferring f_{esc} do not yield such high escape fractions. For example, the UV spectral slope ($\beta = -1.98 \pm 0.11$) suggests a much smaller escape fraction, $f_{\text{esc}} = 0.035 \pm 0.011$ (41). Given these discrepant indicators and large uncertainties, we cannot draw any conclusions about f_{esc} from this galaxy.

The oxygen abundance is $12 + \log(\text{O}/\text{H}) = 7.48 \pm 0.08$ (see above), which is consistent (within 2σ) with the mass-metallicity relation observed in the local Universe for similar-mass galaxies (35). The galaxy's oxygen abundance is approximately 0.6 dex lower (2.5σ) than the more general relation between stellar mass, SFR, and metallicity (the fundamental metallicity relation; FMR) for dwarf galaxies at $z \sim 2 - 3$ (36) (Fig. 3). The oxygen abundances at redshift $z \gtrsim 3$ are known to fall below the FMR by 0.3 - 0.6 dex (42).

To determine whether the $z = 9.51$ galaxy hosts an active galactic nucleus (AGN), we compare our measurements of the stellar mass and the $[\text{O iii}] 5007 \text{ \AA}$ to $\text{H}\beta$ emission-line flux ratio ($\log\{F([\text{O iii}]) / F(\text{H}\beta)\} = 0.65 \pm 0.06$) to measurements from a sample of local galaxies at redshifts $0.04 < z < 0.2$ (44). At similar stellar masses and emission line ratios to the $z = 9.51$ galaxy, less than 1% of the local galaxies were classified as AGN. If this fraction does not substantially evolve with redshift, it is unlikely that the $z = 9.51$ galaxy hosts an AGN.

The half-light radius we measure for this galaxy, $R_c = 16.2_{-7.2}^{+4.6} \text{ pc}$, is very compact compared to galaxies with similar luminosities at redshifts $z \sim 6$ to 8 (Fig. 4). The half-light radius of the $z = 9.51$ galaxy is a factor of $9.8_{-2.6}^{+6.5}$ times smaller than the size-luminosity relation at those redshifts (43), a 4σ difference. The galaxy is also more compact than individual star-forming clumps with similar SFRs observed at redshifts $1 < z < 8$ (45) (Figure S9). Star-forming clumps have been shown to have a trend of increasing SFR at a fixed size with increasing redshift (46).

From our measurements of the SFR and half-light radius of the galaxy, we infer a very high star formation rate surface density $\sum_{\text{SFR}} = 1190_{-580}^{+2440} M_{\odot} \text{ yr}^{-1} \text{ kpc}^{-2}$. \sum_{SFR} has been observed to increase with redshift from $z \sim 0$ to ~ 8 (47). The \sum_{SFR} of the $z = 9.51$ galaxy is a factor of 38_{-11}^{+129} times higher than the galaxies in the highest redshift bin ($z \sim 8$) of that sample (Figure S8).

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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Materials and Methods

Figs. S1 to S13

Tables S1 to S3

References (49–82)

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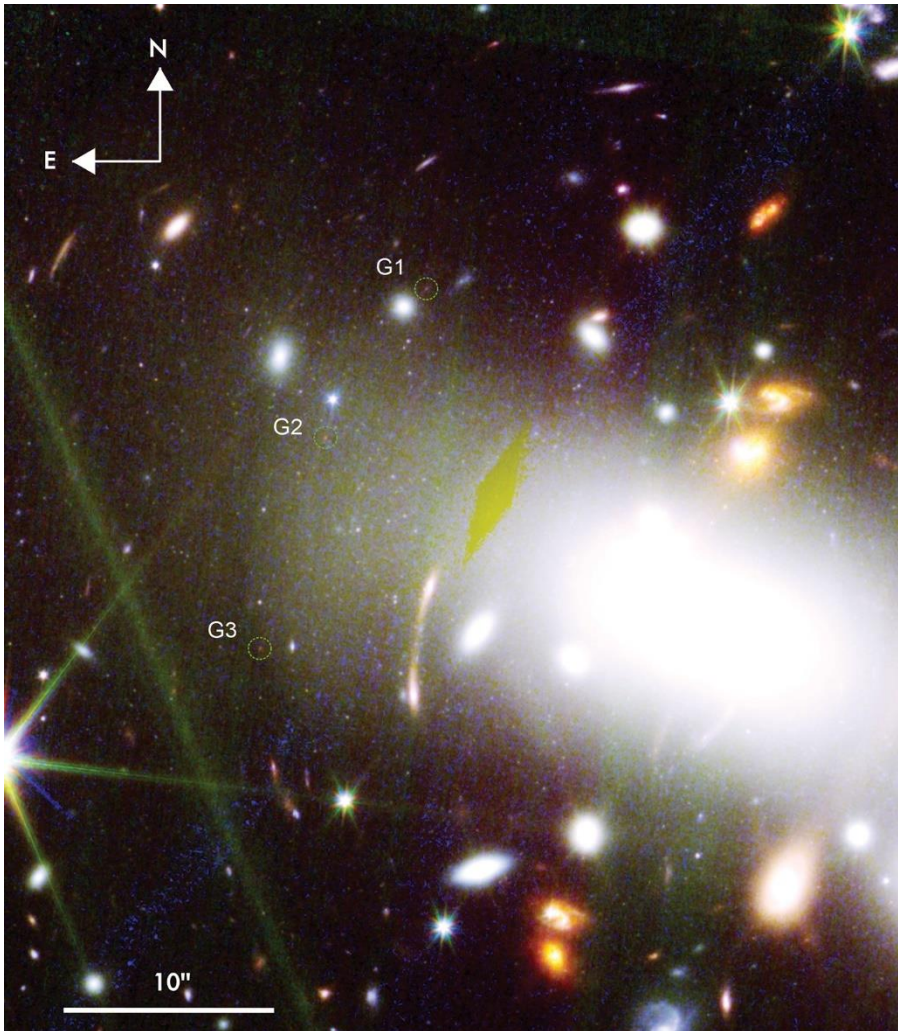


Fig. 1. Color-composite image of part of RX J2129. JWST NIRCam + HST ACS color-composite image of galaxy cluster RX J2129, with three images of the $z = 9.51$ galaxy circled in green. We obtained spectroscopy of image G2. Filters were assigned to RGB colors as: red JWST F277W+F356W+F444W; green JWST F115W+F150W+F200W; blue HST F606W + F814W. The broad blue and green bands are diffraction spikes caused by foreground stars. The yellow diamond is an artefact caused by a chip gap in the HST ACS camera. The individual red, green, and blue images are shown in Figures S11-S13.

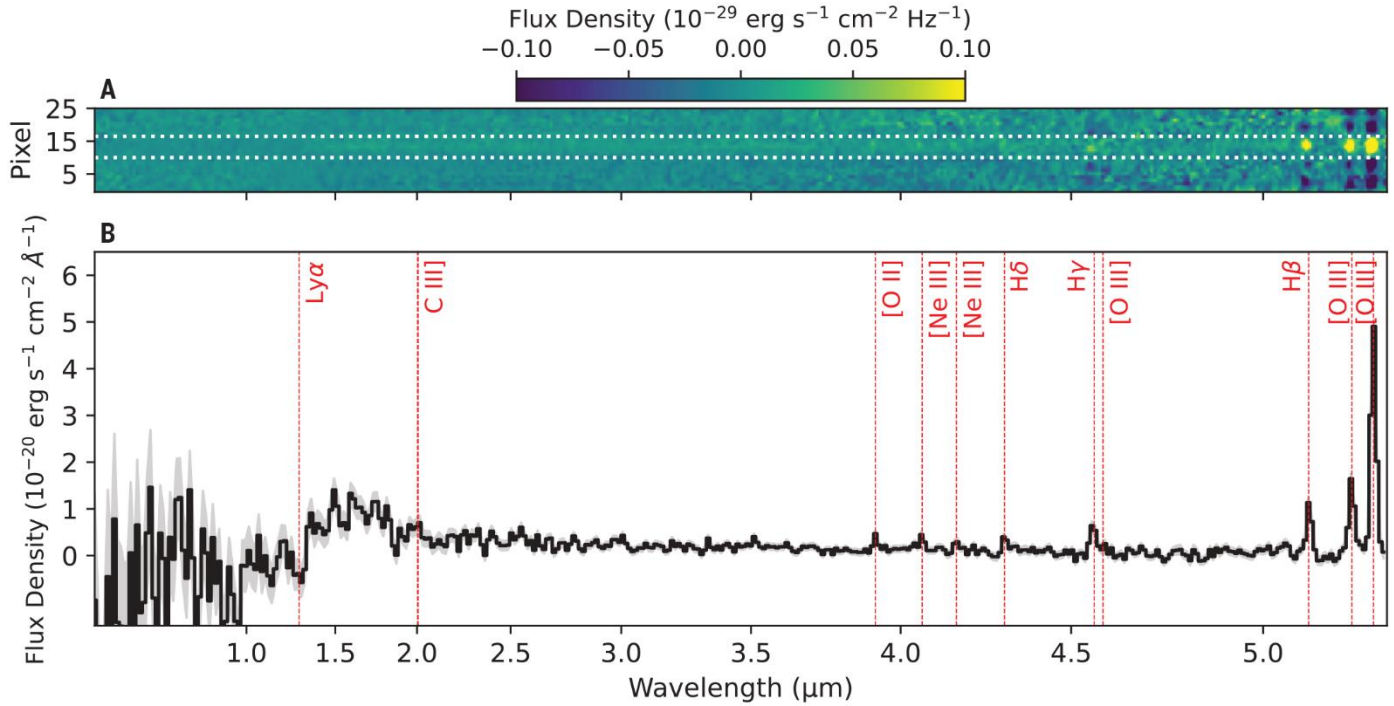


Fig. 2. Observed JWST spectrum of image G2. NIRSpec prism spectrum of image G2 of the $z = 9.51$ galaxy. This spectrum has not been corrected for magnification due to gravitational lensing. (A) Two dimensional spectrum, with flux densities indicated by the color bar. The apparent negative fluxes, in the background near the emission lines, are artefacts produced by the dither pattern used for the NIRSpec observations. The white dotted lines show the window used to extract the spectrum in (B). (B) One dimensional spectrum. The black line is the data, with gray shading indicating its 1σ uncertainties. Red vertical lines indicate the expected wavelengths of emission lines for $z = 9.51$.

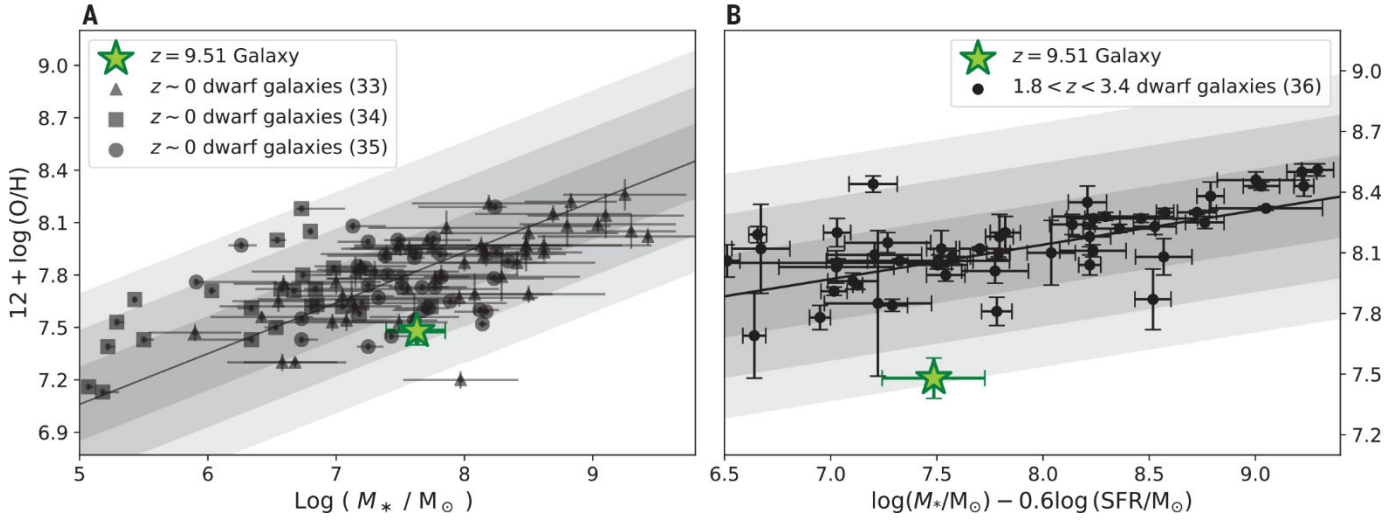


Fig. 3. Metallicity Relations. (A) The $z = 9.51$ galaxy (green star) compared to the mass-metallicity relation defined by local dwarf galaxies. Samples of local dwarfs are shown as black points (33–35) with error bars indicating 1σ uncertainties. The solid line is the mass-metallicity relation fitted to the triangle data points. Gray shading indicates, from dark to light, the 1σ , 2σ , and 3σ uncertainty ranges of this relation. (B) The more general fundamental metallicity relation (FMR) derived for dwarf galaxies at $z \sim 2 - 3$ (36). Plotting symbols are the same as panel A. The $z = 9.51$ galaxy falls 2.5σ below this relation.

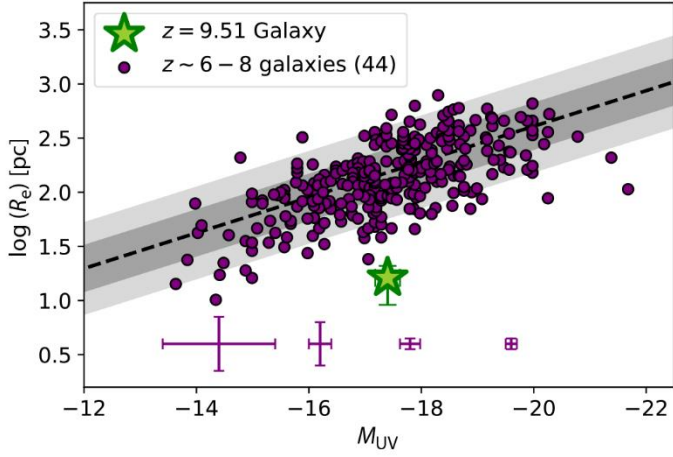


Fig. 4. Size-luminosity relation. The $z = 9.51$ galaxy (green star) compared to galaxies at redshifts $z = 6$ to 8 [purple circles (43)]. The half-light radius of the $z = 9.51$ galaxy is a factor of $9.3^{+10.5}_{-4.4}$ (3.5σ) smaller than the size-luminosity relation fitted to the purple points (43) (dashed line, with dark and light gray shaded regions indicating its 1σ and 2σ uncertainty ranges) The purple error bars indicate the typical 1σ uncertainties for the $z = 6$ to 8 galaxies at representative values of M_{UV} .

Table 1: Emission line flux measurements. Flux measurements and rest frame EWs of emission lines for the $z = 9.51$ galaxy. The flux measurements have not been corrected for magnification due to gravitational lensing. Upper limits are 3σ .

Emission line	Rest frame wavelength (Å)	Observed flux (10^{-19} erg s^{-1} cm^{-2})	Rest frame EW (Å)
$Ly\alpha$	1216	< 39	< 31
C iii] + [C iii]	1907, 1909	< 20	< 51
[O ii]	3626, 3629	5.9 ± 1.6	44 ± 12
[Ne iii]	3869	6.3 ± 1.4	53 ± 12
[Ne iii] + $H\epsilon$	3968, 3970	< 4.9	< 39
$H\delta$	4102	5.7 ± 1.2	52 ± 11
$H\gamma$	4340	11.8 ± 1.7	195 ± 27
[O iii]	4363	< 5.0	< 74
$H\beta$	4861	17.8 ± 2.5	248 ± 35
[O iii]	4959	26.3 ± 1.8	392 ± 27
[O iii]	5007	79.0 ± 2.0	1092 ± 28