My Talk is of Malleability

I do not talk of finances unless I am amongst the poor; I avoid the topic entirely in most other situations. I do not have a southern twang, or a vocal Yankee mark, but amongst those who do, I can use colloquialisms with ease. I am, however, never the one to throw out the initial “y’all.” I am capable and have held slang-laden conversations, and similarly I can converse in a formal, professional register. My public social identity is best understood when it is recognized for its duality; it is best thought of in terms of simultaneous activity. My public social identity is best defined by its omniscience and its non-existence, and my talk within a public social setting best represents a culmination of these two elements. My talk is of malleability.   
 In life, one must always be keen to their sense of survival. By this token, my mother’s mantra “fake it until you make it” has seemingly struck a chord with me, and unconsciously, I believe, I have forced it into the context which best fit my survival needs growing up. At all times, especially in public with strangers, I maintain an heir of politeness, and a tone of neutrality; neutrality and politeness, I have learned, allow for adaptation to one’s environment. They work as an almost filler to stall time long enough for one to understand the rules of their world. Upon meeting someone for the first time my speech reveals very little, if anything, about myself on a personal level. In fact, my politeness, moderate speaking volume, and lack of initial dialect-specific diction work to manipulate a social situation so that I can follow the linguistic lead, so to speak, of whomever I am talking to. This, I have realized, is a survival technique I have developed to ease myself into the various social roles my past has required me to play. This technique, if analyzed, might reveal to those who look close enough, that my social identity is contingent upon the identities of those around me.

I think this technique could better be described as a sort of cultural multilingualism. Growing up, my societal loyalties were constantly being split, and my social roles redefined and multiplied. While I was initially a child of the Midwest, or as much a child of the Midwest as a I could be growing up in suburban Michigan with a not typically suburban-functioning family (consisting of divorced parents, one of whom, my mother, a Texas native, and the other of whom, my father, a man of nomadic nature), my childhood would eventually place me in a sleuth of other settings which required me to adopt new dialects and speaking patterns. Toward the end of my middle school career in Michigan, my father, my siblings, and I moved to Jacksonville, Florida, where they do not, as I thought everyone did, say “pop” in reference to carbonated soft drinks. We lived in a homeless shelter downtown in which no one really liked to use a semi-formal register of speech for daily conversation, and so, I changed the way I communicated there. I dropped the Michigan-specific vocabulary when I spoke to them and I intentionally forgot any pseudo academic language I had learned whenever I walked in the door of the brick Red Cross building.   
 After living at the shelter, my family and I, excepting my mother, who had returned to the lone-star state, moved into subsidized housing, a project, on the other side of town where it was frowned upon to speak, as I was told, “like a cracker.” I once again dropped certain elements of my speech in order to feel safer in my new environment, and picked up new words, slang, that helped me to blend in with the indigenous members of my community. It was yet another language I needed to learn in order to survive.   
 Some time would pass before I moved to Texas and in with my mother, a change which would require me to accept yet another “language” for my repertoire. The southern accent and terminology used within her family threw me through yet another hoop, and by this time, I had already developed my keenness for my sense of survival and so the assimilation to this speech was easy. The difficulty, I would learn, actually lied in attending school.   
 The school I attended in Austin, Texas, was in an area where signs are typically printed in both Spanish and English. My time at William B. Travis High School solidified my need to remain socially open in terms of identity. Not only did I not speak Spanish, but I was also ignorant to the customs of the Mexican-American world. In order to help me survive this environment, my speech became something I used with caution. I spoke with neutrality, politeness, and reserve, hoping to project a sense of respect for the environment. While I did not learn Spanish while I attended Travis High School, I did, when speaking to other students, learn how to approach conversation, and in social situations while I was there, I picked up the English linguistics used by students.

I have learned to be a speech chameleon in my social life. A linguistic chameleon is what I needed to be in order to successfully fulfill the requirements that were inherent within each of the roles my life experiences necessitated. I think that while my speech patterns how are nearly unreadable upon first meeting, my social identity is rather malleable after I understand the circumstances in which I am socializing. In this way, I feel as if perhaps my development of speech-related survival tools and “multilingualism” stand to prove that perhaps my social identity exists within the realm of indifference. I am able to fit into several different social worlds because my public social identity is not a fixed point on the grander map of myself, and my public approach to speaking with others, that is to say, my talk, reflects this. I fit in nowhere, just as I fit in everywhere. Such is omniscience, and such is non-existence.